


VIOLET MOSES

By
Leonard Merrick

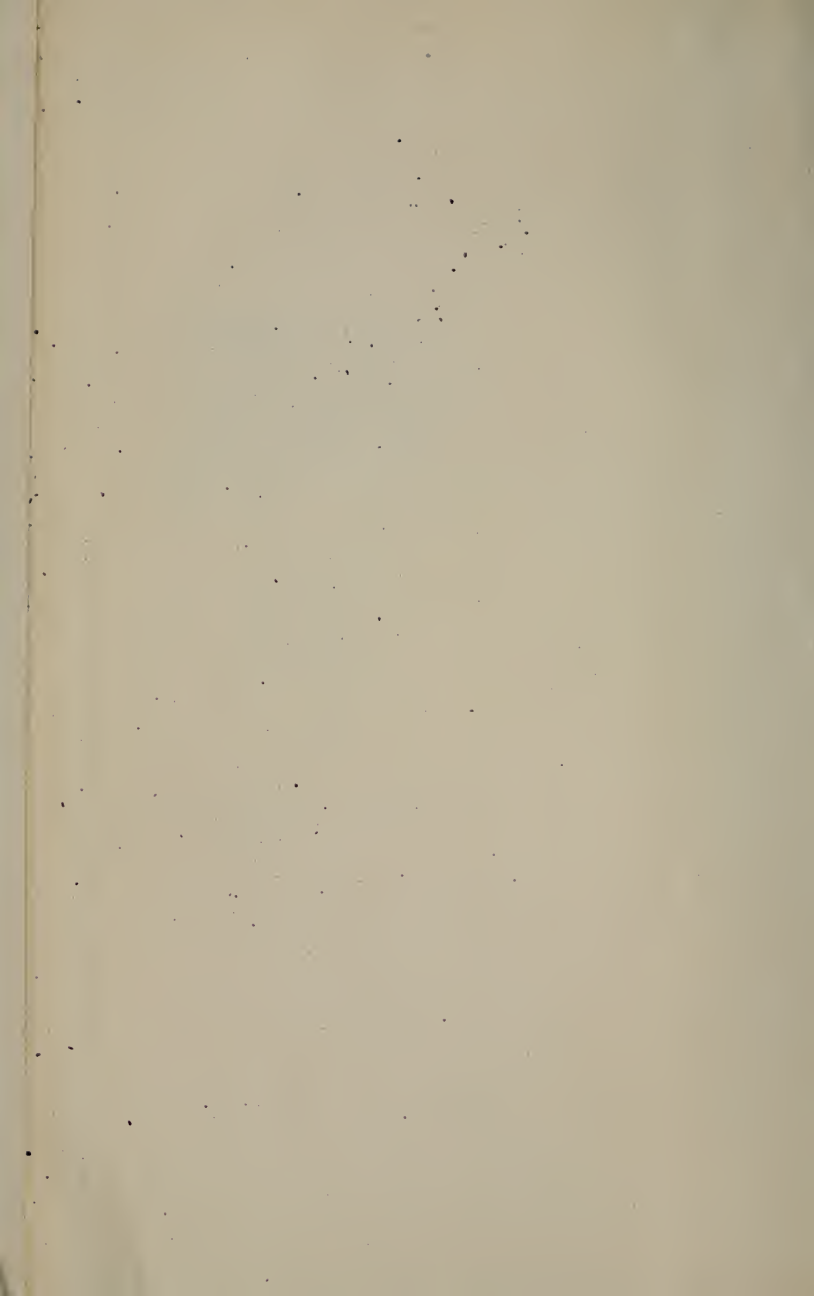


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BY

LEONARD MERRICK

AUTHOR OF "MR. BAZALGETTE'S AGENT"



IN THREE VOLUMES

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VIOLET MOSES.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON the whole, it was to be regretted that Violet did not have children. When she had been married two years, she was as all women are who realize that influences have conspired to spoil their lives, often petulant, and always secretly discontented, whereas, if she had been a mother, it would have given her a mission, and saved her from brooding over her mistake.

Yet, in the light in which wedlock is popularly regarded, the pair might be said

to hit it off very well, too. The early quarrel had had few repetitions: she no longer cavilled at her husband's method of diverting himself; and if it was not exactly a rare occurrence for him to spend an evening out unaccompanied, she went with him sufficiently often to avoid comment, understanding (that smiling spectatress with her increasing store of worldly wisdom) that for them to be seen at these gatherings together was due to herself, lest it might be whispered that "Leopold and his wife did not get on."

And Mr. Moses? He whom romantic young ladies will designate a "brute," and matrons with ampler experience of the species, consider "quite a good fellow," and who was neither the one nor the other, but simply an easy-going, selfish, commonplace

individual married to the wrong woman.
What of him?

Imprimis, though he would have liked a child, he felt the want of it less keenly than Violet, for having relinquished nothing of what was pleasant in his existence, he needed no compensations, and, indeed, when the second year of their union had melted into the third, had ceased to reflect on the subject, and was thoroughly reconciled to the situation. Next, the repression of Violet's inner or truer self, her docility and superficial complaisance rendered her a vastly more congenial companion to him than her natural disposition would have done. Like Shelley's *Peter Bell*, "he had as much imagination as a pint pot," and he thought she had improved a good deal—got older and more sensible. Even her occasional pettishness — and he knew the sweetest

women are pettish at times—he found preferable to those earnest moods of hers in which he had been unable to follow her.

Primarily they had flattered while they bored him, her demands upon his intellect, seeming as they did, although he was conscious he fell short, in response, to indicate latent depths in his mind to which she must have, of course, appealed when he was first attracted by her; but after a while they had bored him purely, then annoyed, and eventually galled him. Her superiority might testify to his refinement of taste as a lover, but his powers of comparison as a husband intimated that he could dispense with the compliment. He had liked her for her difference to other girls when he had been paying her court. If she had not been different he would have persuaded himself she was; now he was relieved because she

appeared much the same—the inconsistency of human nature being nowise so forcibly exemplified as by the rapidity with which men's eagerness to discover originality in their *fiancées* subsides into a shamefaced anxiety to make their wives conventional. He might have chosen from his circle of acquaintances a partner of his amusements eminently more suited to him, but he scarcely knew it; wherefore, if ignorance was not precisely bliss in Mr. Moses's case, it was as near an approach to it as life holds, save at very widely divided moments, certainly deserving to be defined by the term of satisfaction.

And they had a carriage.

And were visited by Mrs. Sholto Benjamin.

So that Violet went to one house where cards till dawn were not inevitable.

How exacting of her not to be contented also !

There is a mixed blessing—mixed in larger proportions of blessing to some of us than to others—known as the progress of time, and as the second year had glided into the third, so did the third merge into the fourth, and in that winter it was, when Leopold and Violet had been united in the holy bonds of matrimony for four years, that people began to talk about a book called “Philosophaster.” How it had attained the dignity of being mentioned they were originally ignorant, as were fully half of them who the author was and what the title meant, but from being asked if they had read it, the public became aware that a review, whose approval is a hall mark, had dubbed the writer “the English Balzac,” then, not to be behind the fashion, they must

be able to pronounce opinions on it, and, finally, that the name of this latest light in the literary firmament was Allan Morris.

Accordingly there was an epidemic of "Philosophaster," it was the topic of conversation forthwith, and rumoured to be the production of an obscure Scottish clergyman, a brilliant young Oxford man, nephew to a famous poet, and of a country girl who had never seen London, all in the same week. While a dozen theories were rife, and everybody answered gaily, "Oh, is that the last?" it was authoritatively asserted in Maida Vale that Allan Morris was a Jew.

His parents had never entertained these co-religionists of theirs, nor was it likely the name of Wilfrid Morris's boy should be remembered by those whom they had, but the announcement was made by Leopold who had been told by Violet, and the Maida

Valeites were proud and rejoiced exceedingly as, to do them justice, they always do rejoice when a Jew distinguishes himself, whether he rises from their midst or not.

“That book the Harts were speaking of must be by a Jew!” she had said.

“Which book? what, Phil something?” he exclaimed. “Why?”

“I lived in Chester, and so did he, he . . . ,” she did not like to say “he was in love with me,” it sounded so vain; “he used to be a sweetheart of mine!” she substituted with a laugh.

She had no intention to deceive, but her statement conveyed an altogether false impression to him; somehow he took it for granted she referred to her schooldays and a tender passion which had been signified by bonbon mottoes.

“Your ‘sweetheart’ seems to have

made a hit," was his careless comment. "I wonder what a fellow makes by a novel! You ought to get the thing."

"Yes," she said, "I mean to."

And "the pretty Mrs. Moses" did get it, having the drab-covered volume carried to her brougham by an official in brass buttons, under the very eyes of an indignant dame who had been vainly inquiring for an unlent copy every afternoon for a fortnight; so advantageous is a regular profile even in transactions with a librarian's assistant.

She read the opening chapter in the drive home, curiously and yet inattentively; it was satirical and clever, and here and there she smiled, noting a familiar phrase or recognizing the personality in some odd assertion, but it took no especial hold on her thus early, so that when she got out she forgot it and left it lying on the seat. As

the servant was divesting her of her sealskin she recollected, and sent down for it, after which, having settled the cushions to her liking, she turned to Chapter II.

The sunshine waned, and dusk stole in about the pretty Mrs. Moses and Allan Morris's book while she read on; she rang for lights, and the luxuriously-adjusted cushions tumbled to the floor, because she moved to the window, and read on there until the lights were kindled. The work was a revelation to her, she was lost in wonderment that the boy she had known could have written it. The plot was of the slenderest, but the ethics for which the pseudo philosophy of the leading character was a vehicle, and the introspection into the weaknesses of feminine nature, indicated in the treatment of the two antithetical women, each of whom was, in a different way, the

means of teaching the philosophaster he was a sham, amazed her. Where had he learnt so much, she marvelled; emotions of her own she had shrunk from defining or even admitting to exist, met her startled gaze from these pages shaped in vigorous words; truths which had never struck her were unfolded and analyzed. It was ridiculous to reflect she was sitting at the feet of the boy she used to lecture, it almost dismayed her to discover a master in such a quarter.

When her husband came in he found her musing, with "Philosophaster" on her lap.

"Hallo," he said, taking it up, "you've got it, then! Well, is it so extraordinary?"

She nodded. "Yes," she murmured slowly, "it is very extraordinary."

"What's it about?" it was unusual for him to display curiosity on the subject of a

novel, but this one was being discussed so.
“Pathetic?”

“Very; the pathos is between the lines though, and not in italics.”

“Oh,” he answered, vaguely, “is it? Will dinner be long?”

“No,” she answered hurriedly; “put it down, dinner must be ready now!”

She did not know why, but it had irritated her to see him fumble the book with his big hands.

Only a few days after this Mr. Moses spoke of “Philosophaster” and its author again. He had been detained in the City the previous evening, and gone with a man into the St. George’s Club, he explained, though the statements conflicted, insomuch as the neighbourhoods of Throgmorton Street and Hanover Square would not be regarded as adjacent by anyone who had to

pay the cab fare. Violet, however, was not hypercritical, and it transpired that in the club he had been introduced to Mr. Morris.

"A very decent chap," he observed; "he was upstairs with one of the members—a journalist or something, whom Mike knew—and we had drinks together, all four of us. I told him we should be happy to see him."

"You told him what?" she exclaimed.

She was standing before the mirror at the toilet-table, and Moses was at the cupboard in his dressing-room; the dialogue was being carried on through the open door. She paused with the comb held up, and looked round in the direction whence his voice came.

"I said we should be happy to see him, that we were always at home Sunday afternoons. Why not?"

"Oh," she said, "I don't mind."

“What is there to mind? he is a big gun, by all accounts! I wish that confounded girl wouldn’t tidy up my things, my dear; I can’t find a thing I want! I told him you were pleased at his success, and he said he remembered you quite well.”

“Did he!” she rejoined. “Well, I don’t suppose it is important whether he comes or whether he doesn’t!”

She did not think it was, but she was surprised at her husband inviting him, nevertheless.

Her Sundays were no longer passed in solitude while Leopold and his friends played *Sechs und Sechzig* below. She received in the drawing-room, where an improvement on the objectionable “music and conversation” was effected by making it conversation and cake; and on the one following his intelligence she was conscious

of a certain thrill of nervous anticipation, and attired herself with more than her customary fastidiousness.

A thoroughly good woman, unless you would condemn her for the coarseness of marrying without love; she believed her information as to the sentiments the expected visitor had once cherished for her to have been perfectly comprehended, and would have been the last to have asked him across her husband's threshold, though her circumspection would undeniably have had its foundation in a dread of committing a solecism, and been sneered at as contemptible in her heart. But now that he was invited, Leopold having no absurd scruples about a matter which doubtless the novelist himself recalled as a folly, she did debate just a little what gown she should wear, and feel annoyed, more than a little,

when at six o'clock the personage in question had not troubled to come.

"The literary lion did not show up?" remarked her lord, as they drove to Mrs. Simmons's.

"No," she responded. "I presume he was better employed."

He was "better employed" apparently until three Sundays later; but on the third, when Vera Lyons was expatiating upon the merits of "a kindred soul and a cottage," speculating the while whether Joshua Raphael would settle the house on her if he popped (for he had failed recently and wore more pearls than ever), and Mrs. Sholto Benjamin was being monopolized by Mrs. Rosenstein, and there was a hum of chit-chat in the room, and the faint clink of spoons on china, Violet heard Leopold speaking to someone on the landing. She

turned sharply as the pair entered, divining who the other would be.

"Yes, very, extremely so," Leopold was saying suavely. "Oh, by Jove, from one of us! In here . . . Mr. Morris, my wife."

"I am pleased to see you, Mr. Morris."

"How do you do, Mrs. Moses?"

Then he was presented to the company generally, and she stole a look at him across Mrs. Rosenstein's hat. She saw a man with a close brown beard, and in a frock-coat; a slightly-built man with thoughtful eyes, which had rested for an instant negligently on her face, and then been withdrawn as he bowed in gratified civility to Mrs. Benjamin.

He saw, among the bevy of bonnets and strangers, a woman in a grey plush tea-gown, reddened where the flames fell, sitting before a gipsy table in the firelight; and the woman's hair was coiled as he had never

known it, so that these flames set the circlet which bound it all ablaze in their vagaries, like the silver of the shoe-clasps, where they flickered too. He saw something else: the realization of a scene such as he had pictured at intervals since the morning he had read the announcement of her marriage in the newspaper, and dreamed of the day when, their paths crossing, she should find him a celebrated novelist courted by her world and superior to it. The reality was a sober version of the fancied situation, perhaps, smacking less of Sardou and more of Robertson; but it is an experience which falls to the lot of few men to fulfil one of these mental sketches at all, and Mrs. Rosenstein's silly encomium on "Philosophaster" in her hearing was sweeter to him than the article of ten pages upon it a great statesman had

contributed to the current number of the "Fortnightly."

He had never forgotten her. That he had been faithful to the remembrance in the highest order of faithfulness to a memory of which men are capable, may also be said, for he had never wavered in his allegiance with his head, nor failed in any of his fitful dealings with women to abominate himself as a beast for passions whose Nemesis was always the thought that that other woman to whom he was nothing, would, if cognizant of their indulgence, despise him, and deem them a contradiction to his former vows of fidelity. To assert that during five years his love had remained at fever height would be false, but at least he had never been in love with anybody else. His mother had died, and for a long while he had been in easy circumstances, the

securities they had retained after the crash, and which had sufficed for her individual expenses, having steadily risen until now he was in receipt of a fair income altogether apart from his profession. As he stood in the drawing-room of the wife whom he had last seen a little girl saying "good-bye" to him in the Lady's Lane apartments, he recollected the hysterical outburst of despair which had disgraced him when she had driven away, and contrasting it with some of the subsequent episodes in which he had frittered money and disgraced himself still more, sneered at his own nature, reflecting what anomalies men were. Despite the fact that many of these episodes had borne fruit in the leaves of his novels, and intellectually he was a gainer by them; despite the fact, too, that his ideal herself had sunk to commoner clay by what

he was convinced must have been a mercenary alliance—indeed, because of her very deterioration—he would have triumphed savagely at that moment to know every unvalued word he had once uttered to her had been proved true, and that he had resisted the meaner temptations with more hardihood than she. How tenderly he would have cherished her had she willed it. Good God, how fond he used to be of her! He would have been a better man, he believed, a nobler one, stauncher to the spirit which shuddered so often at the body if Mrs. Leopold Moses had been Violet Morris, if money had come earlier, and she had cared for him instead of for the riches of the animal who had won her, if all things had been different, and—he looked across at her and their gaze met:

“Will you have a cup of tea?” she said.

He smiled grimly, and took one.

"I want to congratulate you on your book, Mr. Morris, if you are not tired of congratulations."

"You liked it?" he asked.

"I think it great," she replied.

"I am glad it pleased you. No, I am not tired of congratulations; it is my first champagne, and, like a boy, I can't get enough of it. Also, I have been thirsty very long."

"You are candid," she said, "it takes courage to own it, doesn't it?"

"No;" he answered, "our object in writing is to win approval, we are disappointed if we *don't* win it: if we do, who can be deceived by a pretence that the praise for which we have worked so hard is of no account!"

"And yet they say so many writers detest verbal praise?"

“Praises of the unthinking, yes—the cheaper champagnes; and then, after they are used to them! One has to be satiated before one grows critical; my palate is at present a lad’s of eighteen. Yes, quite sweet enough, thank you.”

“What a delight your success must be to your mother; is she well?”

“My mother,” he said, “is dead.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed, “I beg your pardon, I am so sorry! I ought not——”

“It was not likely the name would have had much significance to you even if you had seen the announcement,” he said, coldly; “and, God knows, she was young enough to have lived many years yet. But I have not been alone in bereavement: you, too, have lost one who was dear to you; may I say you had my deepest sympathy at that time?”

She bowed her head mutely. Was it a rebuke, his sympathy following her ignorance?

“Mr. Morris,” said Leopold, joining them, “here’s a young lady who has read your novel and wants to rave to you about it.”

Mr. Morris had been introduced to a considerable number of young ladies of late who had read his novel and wanted to rave to him about it, but he crossed to listen to eulogies from the prettily-confused Miss Lyons with polite alacrity, and Mrs. Moses, watching him, thought if admiration intoxicated him to the extent he had averred, her *ci-devant* suitor had a marvellous gift for disguising inebriety.

As was to be expected, the entire assembly showed themselves more than cordial to the popular author; they would have

liked to bear him off and display him on their own hearthrugs then and there. Vera Lyon's mamma hoped he would dine with them on Thursday, and Mrs. Rosenstein inquired whether he was free this evening. He pleaded engagements recklessly, and avoided pledging himself to anyone. What did such society offer him? To witness Mr. and Mrs. Moses's contentment in their respective acquisitions? He was greatly obliged. He supposed they were happy—he trusted she was, at any rate; from his point of view she had paid the bigger price but the past was sufficiently vivid in his mind to have rendered a series of encounters with the man whose position had been prized more highly than his own love, a humiliation. He had imagined himself to be undecided whether he would pay the visit he had, but curiosity to mark what

changes time had wrought in her had been very strong, and he had come. Well, that was enough; he had called, and he had seen her, *finis*. She looked very beautiful, very ethereal, and very pure; but she had sold herself, for all that. To think a woman could barter her gracefulness away, and then have the effrontery to be dignified afterwards, and composed! Her life was just as base as some pages of his own. He marvelled how he could have blinded himself to it as he had, exalting her image all these years into the confessor of his conscience. What bosh it was for men to credit women with being so much finer and whiter than themselves spiritually, just because on the surface they were softer, and had cooing voices and delicate throats and skins! He had been a fool to worship her quondam innocence as innate

superiority already, but assuredly he would not put himself in the way of having her miserable satisfaction perpetually paraded before his eyes. He was not such a fool as that !





CHAPTER XVIII.

HIS reflections on *mariages de convenance* in general, and on one in particular, were so suddenly acrimonious that he speedily discovered his determination to see little or nothing of Violet Moses in the future had been very wise. He knew the stirring of his blood, that he called contempt, and which had been begotten by a single interview, was a warning of the facility with which she might regain the full measure of her influence upon him; he understood how bad a sign it was that he preferred to deem her mercenary rather than devoted,

and had so angrily rejected the theory of her having possibly given herself through the affections after all, finding the sordid explanation less painful than to picture her throwing her arms round Leopold's neck. He discovered, in fact, the resolution had such a great deal more to commend it than he had originally perceived that it began to waver.

He had not instantaneously fallen in love with Mrs. Moses, but, as has been said, he had always remembered Miss Dyas, and the emotion a glimpse of her had sufficed to awaken was the glow of unsatisfied longings which are as easy to fan into a blaze as the ashes of a burnt-out passion are difficult. She possessed a pathetic interest to him; to the rest she was a young and beautiful woman, but to him she held in her keeping incidents of his life he could

never forget. In the individuality of this woman, as presented to Allan Morris, were comprised a stranger and the girl who had once known him better than had any other creature in the world; she was the same, and yet she had altered, and in knowing the alteration to be but a development of the old identity, in feeling it was she while she appeared somebody else, lay a tremulous fascination. The double character stimulated his curiosity.

It had delighted and saddened him to meet "Violet Dyas" again; it brought back his youth, revived sensations of the period when he had been writing for the "Society Echo," and eating his heart out in the Chester lodgings, waiting for her in the Rows, and watching between Mrs. Shaper's window curtains for the postman: it recalled all "that beautiful time when I was

so unhappy," which he mused on with the welcoming tenderness we ever accord to a reminiscence of our own past where we have figured not discredibly. But Mrs. Moses, in plush and silver, spurred him from the regions of retrospection to those of conjecture. Dwelling on her as she used to be, he said, "How wretched I was!" Thinking of what she had become, he sighed, "How happy I might have been made!" He fought with an eager desire to pierce this dual personality of hers, to search for the maiden to whom he had poured out his soul in the wife who calmly extended him her hand, and after a month's debate with himself—common-sense *versus* an uncommon attraction—he left a card on Mrs. Rosenstein.

This done, he felt relieved. It was a stupid action, but a decisive stupidity is fre-

quently calming; and, it being a fine afternoon, he thought as he strolled down Southampton Row he would go westward and call upon his publishers, with whom he was in negotiation concerning his next work.

In passing Mudie's he heard his name spoken, and, turning, saw Mrs. Sholto Benjamin. She had been on the point of getting into her brougham, but paused to address him, greeting him with the licence of a woman who is old enough to do as she likes and sufficiently youthful to like young men.

"Mr. Morris," she said, in her clear, sharp tones, "I've just chosen all these novels, and 'Philosophaster' is not among them. How deeply are you offended?"

He laughed, and murmured something ordinary.

"Why haven't you been to see us?" she demanded.

"Why, really," he said, "I——"

"No, stop," she exclaimed, "oblige me and stop; don't say you've been 'so busy.' You're original in your book, please don't be hackneyed in your excuses. I hate disillusion. When will you come?"

"I'll come whenever you invite me," he answered, immediately *en bon camarade* with this woman, who, on the strength of her approach to fifty years, was so cordially imperious after one meeting. They stood chatting at the carriage door with the impassible footman holding the handle.

"Can I give you a lift anywhere? I like to be seen about with celebrities, you know," she added, showing her teeth, "and you won't be compromised."

"I'd risk being compromised for the

sake of being happy, Mrs. Benjamin; but I am a very humble celebrity with nothing particular to do."

"If I were Sholto I should reply to that, 'Then let us go and take a drink'; as I am only his wife, I say, 'Come in and have some tea.' Will you? I'm going home, and—Sholto's in the tea trade—you'll find it good."

"If the tea's as strong as the inducement . . ." he smiled; and he got into the brougham by her side.

The first question she put as they drove along was—

"What have you done with that velvet tunic, Mr. Morris?"

He stared. "What have I what?" he asked.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"On the contrary, I could never forget

you. I had the pleasure at Mrs. Moses's of——”

“You had ‘the pleasure’ ages before,” she declared, “when you wore a Brutus curl and open-work socks, only at Mrs. Moses's I didn't know it. Your mother and I were at school together, and once after she married I saw her.”

“Did you?” he cried. Then: “Is that why you're so nice to me?” he asked, almost boyishly.

“Am I ‘nice’ to you? I don't know. I was very fond of your mother, but I daresay if you had not done something clever I should never have recollected it. People are such hypocrites. Is she still——”

He shook his head, and looked out at Oxford Street through the window. He always felt it hard his mother had not been

spared to witness his triumph. Mrs. Benjamin was silent a few minutes, thinking too, and when she spoke again her voice was such a different Mrs. Benjamin's that he nearly started.

"Perhaps she knows all about it where she is," she said, softly, as if reading his mind; "don't have the blues, dear boy!"

After that they grew quite intimate, and over the firm's tea he told her something of his earlier struggles, and of his life as it was now with the pecuniary cares smoothed out. She had taken him not to the drawing-room, but into a little ground-floor room, homely and sweet with the odour of roses—a luxurious little room, in which the Worcester and Crown Derby bowls, instead of being imprisoned in cabinets, held the loose yellow blossoms, and looked ten times more

precious for their condescension. The walls and hangings were of the palest tint of blue, and where the velvet of the dwarf book-cases was drawn back the black oak shelves showed rows of volumes in a delightful condition of shabbiness. Add to this an open piano with the score of the latest opera on it in the corner, a heavy paper-knife marking her place in the "Nineteenth Century" on the table, and a copy of "La Vie Parisienne" lying on the floor, and it will be seen that Helen Benjamin also had something to say. They talked so easily that he became surprised at his own communicativeness, and reflected how much more speedily a man grew confidential with an elderly woman than with a young one. He concluded it must be that in feminine nature the sympathies broaden with the figure, and that while the maturer woman

thinks of the talker, the younger one thinks chiefly of herself. He would have liked to submit the solution for Mrs. Benjamin's opinion, but remembered the construction it might bear, and decided he had better not.

When he took his leave it was with the understanding he was to dine there on the next night but one, and he had some faint hopes that Mr. and Mrs. Moses might be asked as well. These hopes, however, proved to be fallacious, and fate was against him at Mrs. Rosenstein's, too.

That lady responded by inviting him to a "friendly evening," but, as it happened, neither her brother nor her sister-in-law was present, and the sole effect of the *réunion* upon Mr. Morris was to inspire him with a violent disgust. It was his initiation into the card-playing section of the Jews, and, though the fame of their assemblies

had reached him, the vulgarity for which he had prepared himself was exceeded by the reality which met his gaze. Glancing round at the elaborate *toilettes*—seldom in the best of taste—the off-coloured stones, and the disputatious women losing their money and their femininity simultaneously—he wondered how it had all struck the little Chester girl when she had been primarily promoted to the glory of Mosesdom, wondered how it struck her now, and shivered at the notion that by this time she had, in all probability, sunk to the level of her surroundings, and gambled and disputed with the loudest. It was horrible to him to think of her having deteriorated to this, and so it was to feel that one of the first things which must have revolted her was a circle of his own religionists. He was worse than disgusted, he was ashamed.

He, nevertheless, accepted most of the invitations to affairs of a similar sort which were sent to him during the next few weeks, and always failed to meet her: for he only played solo whist, and the invitations, though he did not know it, were the fewer on that account.

One night, about two months after the Sunday he had made his bow to her in her own drawing-room, he went to Mrs. Simmons's, hearing that she and Leopold were expected. The novelty of the assemblages had worn off to him; this was the sixth of the kind he had attended, and, entering, his eyes were less occupied in noting the idiosyncrasies of the gathering than in seeking in the posse that one figure which was responsible for his appearance.

To his mortification he saw that Mr. Moses

had come alone, and, consumed by secret indignation, presently became his opponent in the game. Moses won of him pretty largely, for the author found himself studying the man more diligently than the pasteboard. From studying him he commenced to dislike him; but he was sorry he disliked him, and tried to think he did not. Analyzing himself as freely as his antagonist, he felt there was a goodly root of envy at the bottom of the sudden antipathy, and it was humiliating to mind to envy matter. "Oh, woman!" he cried inwardly, "to give me cause to envy a beast like this!"

With the faculty for self-torture, which he had in so high a degree, he mentally reversed their positions, and decided whether Moses would have been there that night with the inducement which

had brought himself. He knew he would not; he knew no abstract sentiment could move such a temperament to folly, while he was bending beneath the influence like a reed swayed in a gale. Then, he said, the animal is stronger than I. He could never love as I did; but, losing her, he would have put her out of his mind in six months. I am constant? Rubbish! I am weak. Constancy, to be a virtue, must be mutual; a constancy that is all on one side is only imbecile. But in this self-depreciation he was merely unearthing another reason for envying Mr. Moses, after all.

When the party broke up, the stock-broker and the novelist went out together, smoking.

“You must have your revenge, Morris,” said the former. “Mrs. Moses

doesn't play, but that don't make any difference if you say when you're coming; we'll make up a table any time. Hallo, there, hansom! Hi!"

The cab stopped with a jerk.

"What are you doing to-morrow?"

Morris averred that he was disengaged to-morrow.

"Right; remember you're booked to me. Can't I drop you anywhere? No? Well, till then!"

"Till then!" echoed the other. "I'd sooner walk."

So the wife was left at home with a headache, while the husband enjoyed himself out. And she did not play, but that "made no difference!" If she had married him, he thought he would have guarded her more tenderly than that.

A clock in the distance struck five.
He turned up his coat-collar and lit
another cigar.

“Poor girl!”





CHAPTER XIX.

THAT was what he said when he left her house in the small hours next day.

“Poor girl!” he repeated. He said it so fervently that a resolution sprang into his breast never to accept her husband’s hospitality again. And this resolution he kept, though during the ensuing months he met the pair at other houses, and was constrained to pity her as profoundly abroad as he had done in her home. What a life! Albeit his presence in these scenes was attributable solely to his desire to see and to study

her, he felt himself as brutal sometimes as he held her husband while she sat mutely waiting for a sign of the dispersion which would bring her relief. Nor dared he decline to play, and bear her company in her vigil, for fear of provoking remark, and allowing the real motive of his visits to be guessed. There were moments when he was tempted to pitch his cards on the table and go boldly across to her — the words even surged to his lips that he would speak; and then he remembered the farce was being enacted to her as well as to the rest, that she also deemed him there attracted by the pleasures of the game, and in her heart must be despising him for the very vulgarity he abhorred.

He cursed his own folly; he had met her, perhaps, a dozen times, and their

speech together been limited to occasional comments and replies exchanged in the hearing of a score of people. For what had he entered this set? he demanded of himself: that he might earn her contempt? He knew he had no hope of renewing their old relations, that no coarse underlying expectation lurked unadmitted in his mind to disgrace, by existing, the ideal to whom he had ever striven to be more worthy. He was conscious, rather than aware by any train of reasoning, that the mere suggestion of a *liason* with her would have shocked and horrified him; wherefore, said Mr. Morris, I am deliberately chasing unhappiness in the gratification of a morbid sentimentality. *Imprimis*, I was curious about her: indulging my curiosity, I have learned to pity her; as a foundation

of all, I was originally in love with her. Good heavens! what an absolute idiot I am!

He wrote notes of refusal to all the Maida Vale invitations, and meditated a retreat to the country with his novel on the stocks.

It was July, and town was already emptying. Mrs. Benjamin sent him a line saying they were leaving London shortly, and asking if he would dine in Palmeira Place the following Tuesday. Knowing Violet was very friendly with her, and strong in his new-born determination to avoid the danger of encounters, he declined, and set about considering where his retreat should be.

Chester occurred to him—of all places, Chester. He wished to go to Chester and renew the impressions of his youth. It

struck him it would be a delightful thing to re-engage Mrs. Shaper's apartments, and look out upon the ill-paved lane, and have the adolescent idiots bring up his dinner by instalments just as if he were twenty-five once more. He smiled at the notion. He imagined himself strolling up the streets which led to Powis Lodge, even inventing an excuse for entering it, and marking the difference in the interior wrought by the five years and change of occupants. It was the idea only of an instant; but it had flashed across him in the very act of lecturing his weakness and defying its thrall. Then he put it aside.

A fortnight later, while he was considering still, business took him into the City, with which he was very imperfectly acquainted. The business, indeed, was to verify some descriptions he had put into the

mouth of a Lombard Street magnate, and which it seemed to him afterwards might be wrong from A to Z. In Eastcheap he ran into the arms of Sholto Benjamin.

“Morris, by Jove!” exclaimed the tea merchant; “my dear fellow, what are you doing here?”

Morris explained.

“Come and have some lunch,” said Benjamin; “I’ll soon put you right.”

They turned into the “Falstaff,” and, after luncheon, Mr. Benjamin made a proposition.

“Why not spend a few days with us?” he said; “we’ve taken an awfully jolly place at Hampton; there is nothing like the river this weather! What do you say?”

“I am hard at work, I’m afraid I can’t manage a holiday just yet,” answered Allan, doubtfully; “thanks, all the same.”

“Well, come and work then! Look here, there’s a library you can have all to yourself, with a big desk, a view of the lawn, and a couple of hundred capital cigars behind the ‘*Encyclopædia Britannica*’ on the second shelf. I can vouch for those cigars, my boy; try one now.”

Allan did. The cigar was excellent, and town was baking in the midsummer sun. The picture of the lawn, and the river, and a pleasant room, where, in the early morning, he might get through a sufficient amount of “copy” to justify an idle afternoon, appealed to him strongly.

Mr. Benjamin continued:

“Just outside the library windows, between two big trees, there is a hammock; you can almost step into that hammock from the room. When you can’t write, and don’t want to be bothered to go down to the water,

you can lie in it and think over your next chapter. Besides the 'Encyclopædia' and the cigars, there is a lot of light literature in the bookcase—a lot of pernicious novels, in fact, so you see you can read other fellows' books at Hampton, and persuade yourself you're studying. Morris, you will drive home, pack a bag, and go down with me from Waterloo this afternoon."

"Get thee behind me, Satan ; I won't !"

"Morris, if I'm the devil, come to me."

"I shouldn't be able to write a line ; I know the sort of thing—a houseful of company ; perpetual jaunts, jollifications, excursions to see something or other nobody is the least interested in. Inquiries whether you are 'inspired this morning,' as if a book were a passionate love-scene from page one to the end, accomplished in a kind of fine frenzy.

General demands 'how many chapters' you have written between breakfast and lunch, and a chorus of astonishment to hear you don't do one a day. Last, but not least, the solicitous young lady of seventeen, who knocks at the door every quarter of an hour to 'trust you are not being disturbed.' Benjamin, old man, don't persuade me !"

"I give you my word," said Benjamin, who, from suggesting the thing on impulse had grown quite anxious to prevail, "there isn't any company at all ; you will be, practically, alone in your glory. Come for a week ; if it suits you, stop two ; if it doesn't, get a telegram calling you away."

Ultimately, the men went down to Hampton together, with a portmanteau stored beneath the seat.

"You are certain you have not got a houseful ?" Allan asked a little nervously, as

they steamed out of Strawberry Hill.

“Frankly, now?”

“Frankly,” replied his companion, “it is a deuced big house, Morris; it would take a population to fill it! What’s the matter? Are you fearing Mrs. Benjamin won’t be able to find you a room? You need have no misgivings on that head, I assure you.”

“That was not the misgiving,” said Allan, and thenceforward with every station they passed his spirits rose. The almost inexplicable reluctance he had felt to consent rolled from him, and when at length they reached Hampton to find the dog-cart in attendance, he already congratulated himself that he had come. The meadows and hedges, as they sped through the silent roads behind the bay, greeted him pleasantly. The faint smell of the turf after rain, the hush and lazy stillness which hung over the

scene like a haze, all chimed in with his mood, and spoke of peace. A new exhilaration awoke in him.

“Benjamin,” he exclaimed, as he sprang down at the gate while his host threw the reins to the man, “what an ungracious beggar I am, I’m glad you over-ruled me!”

Mr. Benjamin clapped him on the shoulder. “We may as well go into the grounds,” he said, “there’ll be nobody indoors.”

They went through the hall and across a ball-room fashioned of glass, and built out (an evident after-thought), beyond which Allan could see a long stretch of lawn and trees. Descending the steps which led from it the pair landed on the grass, and as they did so a ripple of laughter caused Morris to start and look around. Out in the open two women were lying back in deck chairs

under a cedar. Their faces were from him, but the figure of the one he was doubtful of, nevertheless, appeared deliciously familiar. There was something in the *pose* itself which strengthened the expectant sensation begotten by the laugh.

“You humbug,” he said, smiling, yet with more earnestness than his conductor suspected, “who is that with Mrs. Benjamin?”

“Oh, hang it,” cried Benjamin, laughing too, “you don’t object to one guest surely.”

“False pretences! But who is she, do I know her?”

“Of course you know her, it’s Mrs. Moses. On my honour we only have Moses and her staying with us now, and he goes up to town every morning with me. His wife won’t interfere with you, my boy.”



CHAPTER XX.

“KISMET!” said Morris, and went across and shook hands. Having found her here her presence at once seemed the essential complement to the surroundings; she was, or she appeared to him, so thoroughly in keeping with the scene, with the boughs stirred lazily in the breeze, with the summer sky, and the drowsy softness of the atmosphere, that he was immediately conscious he would if she had been absent have felt a deficiency, though it might have been hard to define what the deficiency was.

“He is captured,” exclaimed Sholto Benjamin, “if you could have heard the objections and the fuss he made! The library belongs to Mr. Morris, it is his property, and nobody is to disturb him in it under penalty of being put in his book.”

“You shall have as much quiet as ever you want,” Mrs. Benjamin assured him. “I was truly glad to get the telegram. A week ago I am afraid you would have had very little chance of writing here, but just now Mrs. Moses and I are queens of all we survey until the men come home in the evening.”

“You are awfully good,” he said, “but I don’t pretend to be a hermit either. I am not so bad as your husband is trying to make out.”

“I should think it must be a dreadful

duty to have to follow up a big success in anything," she declared; "one must have become almost one's own rival! When Sheridan hesitated to begin another comedy they said he was afraid of the author of 'The School for Scandal,' didn't they?"

"I *am* a shade nervous, to be quite candid! But then I always was even when I was only watched by a few acquaintances; so much more is expected of a man who chooses a profession than of one who goes into trade, have you noticed it? A man in business who has a comfortable home and a decent income is thought to have done very well, nobody expects his name to be a household word like Cook's excursions or Colman's mustard; but anything short of notoriety for a professional man is held to be a failure. If he goes in for the Bar, or for Art, or for Medicine,

and doesn't become a Q.C. or an R.A., or a consulting physician, he is spoken of deprecatingly amongst his friends as being 'not quite what we hoped!' Why it should be so I can't say, but it is."

"What does it matter if he is satisfied with his progress himself?"

"Does anybody ever estimate his progress, Mrs. Benjamin, independently of his world's opinion of it?"

"I know one man," she said, "who vows he is going to publish a novel called, 'A Work of Genius,' for the purely personal pleasure to be derived from the combination of the title and his name. You see he will be able to look at the advertisement sheets of the papers and see his book described in print as 'A work of genius by Timothy Smith.' Who is your favourite author, by the way?"

“The greatest novelist who has written in the English language,” he answered.

“Oh, I meant of the living ones,” said she, immediately.

“He is alive.”

Mrs. Benjamin looked perturbed. Really . . . could it be possible the young man was referring to himself? It was too preposterous. She avoided everybody’s eye, and repented the question. He caught her idea, and smiled.

“I am not alluding to the author of ‘Philosophaster,’” he said.

“I thought you were joking,” she averred, eminently relieved. “But, my dear Mr. Morris, ‘the greatest novelist of the language?’ What novelist have we who . . . pardon me, a friend of yours, perhaps?”

“Oh, dear no,” he responded. “I shouldn’t know the gentleman if I saw him in the street!”

“Then who on earth is there who is actually ‘great’ to-day at all; ‘great’ in the sense in which one applies the term to Thackeray and Charles Dickens, for instance?”

“‘A *real* poet—one who’s dead!’” he quoted. “There is a novelist living who is greater than either of the authors you mention; compared to his satire, Thackeray’s is a schoolboy’s spite; beside his wit the fun of Dickens is the horseplay of a harlequinade. When ‘Pendennis,’ in all the pristine stiffness of its binding, is on the top shelf, there will be a shabby beloved copy of ‘The Ordeal of Richard Feverel’ in every parlour, and the world will be laughing, and crying, and holding

its breath in wonderment over the genius of George Meredith."

Mrs. Benjamin was surprised. She had the grace to be ashamed of her surprise. Would he put the title down for her, and some others?

"The aphorisms of 'Mrs. Berry' are the household words of the future," he added, complying. "Yes, Dickens and Thackeray just reached the height to be publicly admired. In appreciating these you will be anticipating your grandchildren."

Here he recollected that *he* was anticipating—somewhat unwarrantably, remembering her age, since she was not a mother yet. Opportunely a volume of poems which had been lying in Mrs. Moses's lap slid to the ground. He picked it up, and the incident created a diversion.

"Browning!" she observed, as he returned it, addressing him for the first time since their greeting. "The taste for the poets which we women have developed here astonishes ourselves. One feels too languid to concentrate one's mind on long paragraphs, and for reading in snatches there is nothing like poetry; one can get such a lot of emotion in sips."

"Poetry and love-making, that is what this place is adapted to," said Helen Benjamin, smiling. "Now if you had come earlier, Mr. Morris, you should have been provided for."

"With an unappropriated 'Browning,' or——"

"Oh, an unappropriated damsel, of course."

"Does one feel the necessity of making love then," he asked, "more in some places

than others? And, as the 'Guide to Knowledge' says: 'if so, why?'"

"Love-making," opined Benjamin, "is governed by opportunity. And, when the opportunity is considerable, often not governed at all."

"Sholto," exclaimed his wife, "don't be improper! Seriously, though, one always does associate a moony couple with a pretty spot and plenty of open air. I believe the lower orders have a strong partiality for Hampstead Heath, for instance."

"It strikes me," remarked Allan, "you are mixing up love-making and flirtation. Flirtation, as your husband says, is the product of opportunity; opportunity is produced by love. A man, if he really cared for a woman, would care for her no more if they were gazing at a sunset than if they were eating shrimps. It is only

the initial stage that is affected by outside influences; the sentimentality, not the affections."

He caught a look of arrested attention in Violet's eyes, and, delighted to talk in her hearing, went on:

"I mistrust accessories in love-making," he said; "they're dangerous. You know Adelaide Proctor speaks of 'the love of loving.' There is a deal of insight into human nature in that phrase; 'the love of loving' is a characteristic that is responsible for a vast quantity of self-deception. Under conditions, self-deception harms no one but the self who is deceived, but throw in a girl and turn on the moon, let Nature play a little incidental music in her orchestra to human nature's comedy, and as often as not it becomes a prologue to a very pathetic domestic drama. A man can see if the

love is in his heart without any starlight to show it to him; it would be a very meagre love a thousand stars were needed to make visible."

"Don't bully the stars," said his hostess; "smoke a cigarette!"

"And we'll all look for the love in our hearts by the flame of the vesta," from Benjamin.

"*Examine*, my dear, not 'look for' it; we're married!"

"Morris isn't!"

"No," he answered, "neither married nor likely to be. A literary man ought to remain a bachelor."

"Why?"

"Because in marrying he gives a rival to his work and to his wife."

"I have heard a similar argument applied to an authoress," said Mrs. Moses

carelessly, "but to an author isn't it a trifle exaggerated?"

"Not unless you consider the wife's duty to the husband greater than the husband's to his wife."

"I don't do that, of course; but I'll tell you what I do: I consider a woman's sympathies broader than a man's. A woman wedded to an author would take pride in his work; a man married to an authoress would only be jealous of her divided allegiance."

"Then man's love, according to you, is more fervent than woman's, since one can brook a rival and the other can't?"

"According to me, man's love is less patient and not so self-denying; I should not call the profession of either a 'rival' to the other."

"I agree," he said, "a literary man marrying a woman with tendencies like his

own may both give happiness and find it, but unless there *is* a reflection of temperament, unless she knows the study or the studio herself—for the link is the creative faculty, not the identity of pursuit—I maintain she will feel his profession a rival and grudge it his attentions. It is not only his time which it occupies, it is his mind; a business man may put his business aside when he leaves it, or he may explain rises and falls to an intelligent wife, but the author cannot put his work aside, it is present with him always, he lives in it, and no woman who is not an artist can bear this or be taught to understand it.”

“I see,” Mrs. Benjamin said, “what you are asserting is that an author should be an artistic monk or an artistic sultan, more for the ordinary woman’s advantage than to benefit himself?”

“More,” answered Morris, “to spare discomfort than to derive joy ; yes.”

“For my part,” cried Benjamin, boisterously, “whenever I hear a man strongly arguing against matrimony, I always expect to be informed of his engagement three months afterwards. Come, now, my dear fellow, do you mean honestly to tell me you have never met a girl you would have married if you could?”

Like lightning there flashed through Morris’s brain the alternatives open to him. The girl he would have married if he could was sitting within a few inches of him ; he could have touched her skirt. He knew—it was no conjecture—he *knew* she must at this instant be thinking of what she had once to him been, and perceived that a frank acknowledgment would hamper their relations here just as much as a jesting allusion

to follies outgrown would be an insult. He shook the ash from his cigarette and turned to his interlocutor with a lie which was a handclasp between him and her, because they alone of the group knew it to be a lie.

“Never!” he said, boldly.

A pleasurable excitement throbbed through him as he spoke; for the moment it was as if the barricade behind which she had entrenched herself had been broken down, and they were united in the secret knowledge. He wanted to look at her, but felt that to do so would be to loosen the mental hold of her, which in the ensuing pause he was sure he kept. As for herself, naturally her thoughts recurred to the past, and though her embarrassment had been beneath the surface she was grateful to him for the unhesitating reply which had made it so brief.

After dinner the five of them—for Leopold had arrived—went down to the river, which was accessible by a private lane on the other side of the highroad. Somebody vetoed the proposition of a boat, and they lounged about the banks. It was inevitable the party should get detached, and in a little while Mrs. Moses and Allan found themselves standing together. Moses was strolling up and down with Mrs. Benjamin, and Sholto puffed his cigar on the bench. They were all within call of each other, yet practically Morris and Violet were alone. It had been the retirement of Benjamin which left them so, and for a few seconds after his withdrawal they were both silent, their eyes bent upon the water.

Allan was the first to say something.

“What a different scene to the one

where I saw you last," he remarked; "how peaceful it is here!"

"Yes," she responded, "I should think an evening like this must help your ideas better than those evenings in town." She was on the point of adding, "Why on earth do you go to such assemblies?" but checked herself.

"I have given them up," he said, answering her without knowing it. "I drifted into them rather than sought them deliberately. I scarcely imagined I should meet you any more, unless it happened in Palmeira Place."

"There is our own house," she reminded him, civilly; "we are always pleased to see you there."

A sudden temptation assailed him to trample her robe of artificial composure under his feet.

“You never told me so,” he said, bluntly.

It was true; she had never invited him nor led him to infer he would be welcome. Often she had debated the matter with herself, and always shrunk from uttering the simple formula politeness dictated.

Her brow contracted in a faint frown, but it was impossible for him to retract, and, indeed, he had not any wish to do so: he was in the frame of mind in which a man will be rude sooner than conventional. Her husband and the hostess had their backs towards them, sauntering in the opposite direction, it would be a couple of minutes before they reached them again. Benjamin was still placidly puffing his cigar on the bench.

“Mrs. Moses,” he said, hurriedly, “you were my friend once, as a girl you gave

me the greatest friendship I have ever had. No, listen to me, don't be unkind; no!—I won't recall anything you want me to forget, but be a friend to me still! Will you? You used to be my *confidante* in those days, you remember; don't make me act the stranger to you now, it hurts!"

He waited—it seemed some time. The frown on her face deepened, and she was biting her lips as if in indecision.

"Oughtn't I to have asked you this?" he questioned. "I have not offended you?"

"I am," she said at length, and her voice sounded cooler than he had fancied it would be, "a good deal older than the girl you are talking about, Mr. Morris, and my faith in many things is a good deal weaker; what is it you ask of me?"

"I want you to be my friend," he averred. "I want to be yours!" he kept

harping on the word "friend," and with every repetition discovered it to express his longing less. A consciousness was thrilling him that it was her love he wanted—the love he had wanted five years before.

"I did give you a friendship, sincere and true, so true that I have not forgotten it—"

"I know, I rejected it; I will value it at its worth now; give it me again!"

"I cannot give it to you, we are neither of us the same," she answered, slowly; and they were joined by the others.

By-and-by they returned to the house, but conversation flagged that night, languishing even to the level of Mr. Moses, with whom it was never a strong point, and from listening to the inanities he let fall, which by reason of the dulness of the rest were becoming quite a prominent and obtrusive feature, Mrs. Benjamin sought

refuge at the piano, where she rattled off a succession of waltzes *pour encourager les autres*. He was a dreadfully tedious person, she opined, like all the Maida Vale crew; but for Violet she would never have had him down! Morris was moody, and Violet disturbed by a nervousness which was new to her. She wondered why she had been unable to answer his request less brusquely, and she was rather sorry that he had come. She did not desire to renew the intimacy, yet she could not determine why to do it was obviously beyond her power. It perplexed her. He had improved extremely, she considered; nevertheless, the frank cordiality she used to feel for him was gone. He even awed her a little. People notoriously change in a few years more to those from whom they are temporarily divided than to themselves, for to them-

selves the change is so gradual that they are insensible to its workings; also a man's bearing is influenced far more by those conditions of his life which affect the world's treatment of him than by any inward virtues or weaknesses estimated solely by his conscience, and Allan with success and prosperity had developed an air of authority, almost of masterfulness, which had been totally lacking in the Allan living on a guinea a week. Even when he sued to her for her friendship just now, she noticed his tone was entirely different from those she recollected pouring out wild supplications. Here he was a man stooping to appeal to her; formerly he had been a boy whom she had patronized and rebuked. Her reverie made her for a while deaf to the dialogue going on around her, but presently fragments of sentences

disentangling themselves from the hum pierced her abstraction, and, beginning to pay attention, a feeling of shame possessed her that her husband should show himself so stupid in Mr. Morris's presence. She waxed abruptly gay and talkative, and covered his ignorance by a little histrionic effort which intensified her secret perturbation.

Next morning, however, her disquietude had passed. Morris appeared at breakfast in flannels, an attire which, on the presumption his intentions were literary, seemed an unnecessary concession; and shortly after the other men's departure, the women betook themselves to the garden, leaving him to devices which, the flannels to the contrary, he had announced were to be strictly industrious. The library, as Benjamin had asserted, overlooked the lawn, and from the

desk where he sat, he could, by a slight tilting of the chair, see them under the trees. He was a firm believer in a view as an assistance to composition, but he was in no humour to write to-day, and he tilted his chair more frequently than he penned a paragraph. About twelve o'clock when, after a tussle with refractory phrases, he glanced out through the window again, he was surprised to see Mrs. Benjamin had gone, and Violet was left on the spot alone. She had ensconced herself in the hammock, and there, with one arm drooping till the fingers nearly touched the turf, was swaying listlessly to and fro in the shade. The man who says "Kismet" is capable of any self-indulgence, and five minutes later he dropped into the basket chair she had vacated.

"I am going to allow myself a holiday,"

he said in reply to her inquiries. "I daresay England will curb its impatience."

"Is this you are at work on as good as 'Philosophaster?' " she asked.

"You will be able to judge better than I. For myself, I thought I had written better things than my last, but that 'caught on,' and the others fell flat. Have you read any of the earlier ones?"

"I read your first," she said, "and I liked it very much. I saw 'By the author of,' etc., etc., on 'Philosophaster,' so I learnt there had been several between, but I don't know those."

"There *were* 'several between'! Each of them was alternately hoped for and despaired of for months. You remember the sighs and prayers that went up for the first one, which you say you read," he continued, hastily, "the faith I used to have

in it Monday afternoon and the agony of misgiving I suffered on Tuesday? Well, each of the 'several between' saw just the same state of affairs, and brought me just the same amount of notoriety when it was finished."

"You are famous now, at any rate."

"It doesn't compensate for the acute disappointments that are gone," he said, "quite. I don't think applause can ever thoroughly wipe out the memory of a hiss."

"But you weren't hissed, you can't say that; you were only——"

"I was only passed over. But you should be able to imagine what that means following labour and anxiety which lasted day after day for years."

"I can," she admitted; "it must be horrible."

“I was in London when the notices of my earliest attempt came out. I went to a news-room every morning, and searched for reviews. For a week I used to set out with a vague delirious expectation of half a column in the ‘Telegraph.’ Going along the Strand I even invented sentences of the sort of praise that would delight me most. I thought, ‘Suppose, oh, suppose, they were to say this! Oh, if they only called it that!’ And I saw myself taking them to my mother and watching her amazement. In a fortnight I expected less, less I fancied would content me; and at length I did find a paper with a notice in it. There were five or six, perhaps, altogether, but the first I found was the one which brought my heart into my throat. I clutched at it. The capitals of the title, *my* title, turned me dizzy, and then . . . Mrs. Moses, I shall

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never forget the blank sensation that crept over me as I read the miserly acknowledgment they had granted. They didn't run the thing down, but I think the effect was almost more chilling than if they had. Even the author himself could not put much expression into a criticism whose only adjective was 'promising.'"

She shook her head. "No," she smiled, "there is certainly an insipid sound about 'promising.'"

"'Promising' is what you would have termed once 'mutton brothy,'" he said. "Now, don't debate with yourself if you are going to freeze. In talking to you I am awfully awkwardly situated. Let me be frank: the past is the basis of our acquaintance, and yet I mustn't allude to it. I am in the quandary of Mr. Dick with King Charles's head."

“Mr. Dick was deficient in intellect,” she rejoined, half laughing.

Her pillow had slipped. He got up and righted it for her.

“Is that better?” he asked.

She nodded. “Thanks!” Five minutes before she would have said, “Thank you, very much,” and he appreciated the subtle difference. The temptation was strong to refer to her late harshness—“cruelty,” he would have termed it; but though it would have been an agreeable topic to discuss, he knew better than to jeopardize the familiarity she was according by reminding her she had refused to grant it.

“Let me hear,” he suggested, resuming his seat, “something about you; I have been prosing enough about myself! What an egotist you make of me, by-the-by—you always did; but I seem bound to relate

everything that has happened to me through the whole five years now I see you again."

"What am I to tell you?" she inquired, with a little air of submission which Mr. Morris found bewitching.

"Are you going to be quite nice?"

"How? . . ." she exclaimed, "what do you mean?"

"Well, you know you left Chester—may I say 'Chester,' or am I to forget it's on the map—to go to London and your father. Begin at the railway station and work down to to-day, if you want to be satisfactory."

A shade passed over her face, and the smile that had been lingering on her lips faded. Watching her as he was, he perceived he had struck a discord.

"I've hurt you," he said, instantly, "say nothing. I am so sorry."

This quickness of his brought up a smile again.

"No," she answered, softly, "you haven't hurt me."

"You looked so mournful for a second. Weren't you happy where you went?"

"Not very," she murmured. "Oh, there is no reason why I should not own it, I was miserable! I was so uncomfortable that I have seldom visited my relations since my marriage. I hardly see them."

"I did not know you had other relations than your father," he said, sympathetically. "Don't speak about it if you would rather not."

"There is not much to say. Do you think it wrong of me to neglect them? My father has gone back to the States, and the rest were . . . If you heard of anybody

else behaving so you would think it shocking of her, I suppose?"

"It all depends on the provocation," he responded, delighted at the unconscious insinuation of his partiality. "Only a fool would reply to such sketchy information, 'you are quite right!'"

"I believe you would consider me right," she said, meditatively. "When we do meet we are distinctly amiable."

"I can reply that I believe you to be the last woman to harbour resentment in cases where many would forgive," he declared. "I can assert that honestly. I should fancy you would forgive most things."

"But isn't that a very weak character?" she asked, raising herself on her elbow, and regarding him with attention. "I can't judge whether it describes me or not, so you

needn't make compliments, but it strikes me as being weak, somehow. For instance, you wouldn't take as one of your heroines a person of a temperament like that, would you? You would be afraid your readers would feel her traced in milk and water instead of being modelled of flesh and blood."

"A woman's weakness is her strength," he said. "There is no reproach her flesh and blood can utter which makes a man so repentant as her forgiveness. The greater the injury that has been done her, the greater the man's abasement at her tenderness. If women realized how sweet they are when they pardon, there would be fewer quarrels."

"It must always be good to forgive injuries, in your opinion?"

"It can, at least, never be bad—when they were done to oneself. I am no up-

holder of the cheap magnanimity which condones wrongs one did not suffer, and overlooks injuries that were inflicted on somebody else. But, then, I am a man; it is for you to teach me here, not for me to preach to you."

"What faith in women you have!" she commented. "I thought only boys worshipped our sex like that!"

"With every good woman who is born another angel leaves Heaven," he said, "another spirit is lent for our redemption; and in her heart she brings a ray of the eternal sunshine to illumine, for the man she loves, the path his eyes might not discern. If she has failings, it is that she may the better understand his weaknesses; if she has faults, it is that he may not shrink from her affronted by his own unworthiness. Woman," cried Mr. Morris, "woman was made last to

crown Creation! After the glory of the skies and the marvels of the land, man and the other beasts looked a falling off in the Supreme handiwork, and so light saw God's masterpiece."

At this juncture Mrs. Benjamin, who had evidently been indulging in a fresh *toilette*, was visible at the windows beckoning them in to lunch, and they went across the lawn to meet her, each sensible that luncheon was an interruption and a bore.





CHAPTER XXI.

A NEW life began to open to Violet Moses, a life which had in it all the tenderness of early morning, when the sky is flushed faintly by a cause that has not yet disclosed itself.

The apathy against which she had struggled since her marriage, and seldom succeeded in wholly banishing, disappeared. She rose with a novel lightness of heart, which was born of expectation; her days had acquired a zest or interest which was expectancy fulfilled.

Yet at present it would have been hard

for the most severe of purists to define what was wrong, unless it was the fact that Mr. Morris no longer endeavoured to combine work with recreation at Hampton, and took his pleasure undiluted by any admixture of attempted duty. For example, it was not easy to say what harm lurked in his inquiry if she wrote still; nor could it be accounted wicked that on the first occasion he had pulled Mrs. Benjamin and herself up to the backwater, he had owned to her, smiling, in a momentary *tête-à-tête*, how recent an accomplishment his sculling was, painting a ludicrous picture of his bygone aspiration to take her on the Dee and his coeval fear that he would be invited.

None the less, each one of these allusions to the past growing out of a chance phrase or a reminiscent situation had its danger. The question anent her literary ambitions,

killed and buried, reminded her she used to confide them to his ear: his confession of the embarrassment he had suffered by being powerless to gratify his desire to take her on the Chester river immediately begot the reflection that the origin of the desire had been his love.

From breakfast until the return of the other men from town, he was almost continually with her—rarely alone with her, but with her. He talked before her, poetry, philosophy, God knows what; often saying much that he did not think, and more that he would never have penned, but saying it earnestly and deluding himself he thought it, since it obviously accorded with her own opinions. When he was absent, his hostess sounded his praises, dwelling on his tact and unobtrusiveness which rendered him, instead of a perpetual tax on her devices in his

position of the only male guest, an agreeable addition to the household.

It happened on a morning when the Moses's and his own visit alike were nearly finished, that Mr. Morris made one of those discoveries a malignant fate or an all-wise providence generally ordains a man similarly circumstanced shall make too late to profit him to any great extent. The tardiness is usually ascribed by the man to malignant fate. Waking before the dressing-bell rang, and descending for a lounge about the grounds, which were considerable, he discovered the unprecedented freak on his part to be an habitual practice of Violet's. It was intensely aggravating. He found her at the entrance to the orchard, and the exhilaration that had leapt into existence at the glimmer of her skirt between the trees faded into blankness when, answering his surprise,

she told him the act which was such an exception with himself had been the rule with her for weeks.

She was dressed in white ; as a wife he had never seen her look so girlish. There was a freshness about her which seemed to him borrowed of the early hour—a fragrance springing naturally from the dew-bent bushes, and the breath of the grass, and the long, damp stalks that glistened across their feet. The thought that morning after morning he had missed the opportunities this custom of hers afforded, vexed him too passionately for his discretion to conceal it ; experience being far less valuable in love than in flirtation.

“ I wish I had known,” he exclaimed.

“ You should not be so lazy ; the best part of the day is over before you come down. It is delicious ; and then one feels

on such good terms with oneself for being so energetic.

"I can quite understand I have lost a great deal," he said; "there is no need for you to assure me of it."

She was pinning some barberry leaves on the white gown, and glanced up at him quickly with the faintest glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

"What is the matter with you?" she asked. "Is the holiday weighing on your conscience?"

"Why did you keep these rambles of yours so secret?"

"There was no particular reason why they should be announced, was there?"

He drew nearer to her; they were lingering on the spot where she had gathered the spray.

"Don't you think it was a little selfish

of you — don't you think you have been very unkind?" he murmured. Under the stimulus of the first traces of coquetry he had discerned in her, his irritation was assuming another phase.

Her face was bent over her bosom again, and her fingers were still busy with the pin.

"The orchard is open to all! Besides, they weren't kept secret, everybody is aware of them: Mrs. Benjamin, her husband, mine——"

"Don't!" said Allan, wincing as if some sharp instrument had pierced him; "don't explain. I see . . . only *I* was ignorant!"

He shrank back from her; the inclination to approach her was gone. He recollected whence this woman had just

come, and, remembering, it was to him as though her freshness were suddenly tainted. In her beauty there was no longer anything akin to the sparkle of the dew and the odour of the flowers; the unblemished niceness of her costume itself jarred upon him like a lie. He stood staring dumbly away from her with a sensation of repulsion that was almost disgust.

It could not last, it was not in nature for it to last; a fiercer hunger merely than he had yet known swept over him in its place. When she spoke next, he replied to her in a tone nearly as careless as her own. Only while they sauntered together along the narrow paths, and the folds of her skirt sometimes fluttered across his knees, the veins in his arms ached with the restraint he was putting upon him-

self, and his mouth shook a little under his moustache.

“Why do we find the true sweetness of a thing always when it is drawing to its close?” he said, presently. “Is it inevitable we should never appreciate without regretting at the same time!”

“We mostly regret what we appreciate. How silly; that sounds Hibernian, doesn’t it? You understand what I mean: appreciation is generally another name for retrospection.”

“It isn’t what *I* meant, though; quite the reverse. My sorrow is anticipation. I was thinking of next week: the day after to-morrow. I was wondering what I shall do with myself when all this belongs to the past.”

“Write great books, look forward! Look forward to——”

“To what? Go on; give me some pretty platitude that deceives neither yourself nor me! You know how much I have to look forward to; you know mine is a spoilt life. Now prose to me about the delight of conscientious labour, and virtue being its own reward!”

“Mr. Morris!”

“I told you I had resolved to cut those card parties in town. What do you suppose ever took me to them? What do you suppose frightened me away? I was resolved because I felt the temptation I had yielded to was going to ruin me—to bring back the double-damned misery I suffered once before. When I came down to this house I never dreamt of seeing you, never guessed you were here. If I had, I shouldn’t have come—you know it!”

"I know it?" she faltered. "I?"

"Because you know I love you!"

She stood motionless, with the eyes shining in her pale face fixed upon him in a kind of horror. Then the lids drooped; her head, her whole body appeared to droop as if, without any warning, her strength had quite given way. The coquetry and laughing assumption of blindness to the cause of his annoyance with which she had earlier had the advantage over him were totally gone: she was all at once like a little child, thoroughly helpless and pitiable.

"Oh, why do you speak to me so?" she moaned feebly. "Why did you tell me? What have you said it for?"

"You knew? . . . *Didn't* you know?"

"I wasn't sure . . . I thought . . . Oh, *why* have you said it?"

Her face was now completely covered by her hands, but the cry of the last words, and her figure rocking to and fro, showed how deeply she was moved.

“Don’t go on like that . . . for God’s sake! you will make yourself ill! Violet! My dear one, listen to me. I have tried to do without you, but I can’t. From the afternoon I met you again it all came back—it was never dead, but it was still, quieter; I believed I had got over it. I was wrong! Even when you were most lost to me, I never forgot you; I was always thinking about you, hating myself for every action that seemed a sin against you, though I felt you wouldn’t care. Sometimes I could say, ‘I am growing worthier to love her at last.’ Sometimes I said, ‘I have sunk too low to dare remember her to-day.’ And then, always

like a gibe, came the dreary knowledge :
‘But she doesn’t care, whatever you are
she doesn’t care!’”

He was speaking in hurried whispers across her shoulder, and now his fingers, stealing forward and hovering about her in timidity, dropped lightly — so lightly that as yet he was scarcely conscious of the contact—upon her sleeve.

“If you were less sweet and pure to me,” he murmured, longing to make the touch a clasp, but fearing precipitancy might lose him what he had, “I shouldn’t admit these actions; if my love for you had less of homage in it, I should be silent about follies you don’t suspect; but I won’t have my confession to you incomplete for good or for bad. I have erred; I have been just like other men; I have loathed myself! But through it all I

have cared for no woman but you—that's true, true as my soul and the God that gave it—never one moment in all the years for any woman but you!"

His fingers had reached the warmth of her wrist, and he was dismayed to find her start away from him. There was a pause, during which she was obviously struggling to get command of her voice, and he waited mutely for her first word, while the stir of the breeze in the branches sounded phenomenally loud in his ears, and the *whit-twit* of the sparrows had risen to a clamour.

Then out over the orchard reverberated the prolonged clanging of a hand-bell. Drowning the birds' chirping and the solemn rustle of the trees, the jangle rang resonant and shrill like an alarm.

They gazed at one another for an instant with startled eyes.

"It is breakfast," she said, in a nervous gasp.

"Give me your answer before we go."

She began to walk in the direction of the house.

"Give me your answer; I am never alone with you!"

"What answer do you expect? What you have said is an insult, you know that! You have pained me, of course: it would be foolish to pretend I am only indignant—you see what you have done, my face is a disgrace—but the pain is that you should have put such a shame upon me! You would never have spoken so if you had had any consideration, any respect; you must think me a very bad woman

that you have the courage to say such things."

He looked at her aghast. "Oh," he cried, "how can you be so cruel?"

"I have been to blame, too—I should have known better than to allow you the opportunity; but I didn't understand that if I were friendly with a man he would suppose I was depraved. No man I have met before has ever taught me the lesson; it was reserved for you."

The tone and composure after her resistless agitation bewildered him. He had anticipated tears, despair, terror, and been prepared for them, but against this contemptuous self-possession his arguments fell still-born. Was she the same woman who had just been moaning broken phrases which were half avowals of her own

tenderness? One of these phrases flashed back at him:

“You *said* you thought I loved you!” he exclaimed.

Without replying, she walked swiftly on. Either the retort embarrassed her, or she had decided to maintain a silence.

“You *said*——”

“I did say so, yes! Well, if you will have it, it is for that reason I am leaving; the visit was to have been longer.”

“You are making me feel horrible,” he remonstrated, humbly.

But he did not know whether to believe her, and in another minute the house would be gained.

“In the meantime,” she added, “I imagined I could rely upon your honour.”

“Have a little pity,” he muttered.

“My heaven! I am all in the wrong, I am quite at your mercy; but you are being wantonly brutal, you are being barbarous to me. I have loved you——”

“You have said more than enough. I imagined I could rely upon your honour; you have banished the illusion already.”

“You have no feeling for me; no love, no compassion in return for a constancy like mine?”

“Love for you! Are you mad, Mr. Morris? The only feeling I had was liking. That, I need hardly say, you have killed!”

“I shall not attempt a resurrection,” he declared, coldly. “How are we to go in—straight into the dining-room?”

“I am going to my room through the hall door; you may go in whichever way you prefer.”

This was an euphemism, since, besides the hall door, the only available means of entrance was afforded by the French windows to which he had referred. He bowed, and left her, comprehending the *rencontre* was to be unmentioned.

When he strolled in he was relieved to find the dining-room occupied solely by Mr. Moses, who, with the gloom of a Somerset House official on his brow, was lounging on the hearthrug awaiting the appearance of his hostess, and, under these circumstances, the imprudence of concealing the meeting did not fail to impress itself on Mr. Morris. It was very easy to incidentally allude to it now, while if, as he had presumed would be the case, breakfast had been already in progress, the coming in late from the garden together, and making for the two vacant chairs under

the mute interrogation of three pairs of eyes would have had its awkwardness.

“Hallo,” said Leopold, “I didn’t know *you* were given to perambulating so early?”

“First offence,” he responded, equably, “on my part. I had a bad night. I see Mrs. Moses makes a regular thing of it. What an idea! She tells me she’s done it every day!”

“Ach, women! Where is she?”

“She went up to her room, I fancy. What’s become of everybody this morning?”

“I don’t know; don’t know what the devil they’re doing. We’ll miss that train again if they aren’t sharp. That’s the worst of stopping at other people’s places. I hate loafing about a platform for half-an-hour.”

"Gentlemanly beggar beneath the surface, aren't you?" thought Mr. Morris. "What a cur I should feel now if I liked you!"

"Yes, it has its drawbacks," he said, going on to reflect it would be advisable to repeat his allusion to the encounter in Violet's hearing lest she might blunder presently by talking as if it had not happened; "personally, I haven't done a stroke of work for a fortnight."

"Reckoned work of your sort could be done anywhere," rejoined the stockbroker, indifferently; "before turning in, and in odd moments, don't you know?"

"Yes, knock off a volume or two while I'm smoking a pipe. It's a popular delusion."

"Idiot!" he concluded mentally, savage with the mortifying consciousness of having

made one of himself in the orchard. And he began opening the letters which had been lying beside his plate.

The others had descended, and Helen Benjamin was pouring out the coffee when Violet came in and took her seat with a general "good-morning," which might have been regarded as including himself or not, and he launched his hint to her without delay, in an account of his sleeplessness addressed to somebody else. She was a shade paler than ordinarily, but otherwise evinced no traces of her recent emotion; evidently the face she had described as a "disgrace" had been subjected to some feminine restorative process upstairs. She chatted calmly to Helen, and once she laughed. "Good Lord," meditated Morris, helping himself to omelette, "what actresses the best women

are; who would surmise she had just gone through a love scene, and been calling me every scoundrel in her vocabulary!"

He had proposed to favour the company with a flow of small talk himself, in order to cover the reticence which he had conjectured would be inevitable to her, and to inspire her with gratitude for his tact, but his cleverness was clearly superfluous. Her independence was so very manifest, indeed, that the forced ability for loquaciousness he had been cultivating expired, and despite the sincerity of his love and the depth of his wound which was smarting sorely, his vanity was somewhat vexed to perceive how very well she could do without him.

The notion occurred to him that she might be presuming he would quit Hampton forthwith; this he should certainly not do,

for he was anxious to have speech with her again, and would manage it somehow. But seeing he did not depart, she might have invented an explanation by the time her husband returned from the City for wishing to bring her own visit to a hasty termination and for leaving to-morrow instead of on the day following. That would be as disastrous to him as if he behaved properly and retired from the house instantler. He determined that if he avoided her during to-day, which under any conditions was not likely to profit him much, she might condone his procrastination, and decide to risk another twelve hours of his society rather than excite comment by any abrupt adieux. Once let night fall without an announcement being made of any change in her intentions, and he would be assured of the whole morrow in which to secure a chance of being

with her alone. Thus Mr. Morris while he stirred his coffee.

After the trap had driven off to the station with the men, he shut himself in the library, the letters he had received furnishing the excuse of correspondence, and, though he busied himself with a few notes for form's sake, for the most part he permitted his thoughts to dwell unrestrained on the recent event.

He had not meant to tell her ; no, it had been pure impulse ; and few men do declare themselves to married women on anything save impulse. A man may occasionally select his necktie, and put on his patent leather shoes, and rehearse the sentences in which he will offer himself to a single girl—exceptional enough this—but the cases are very rare where conscience is so dumb that the first revelation of his feelings a man

utters to a wife is deliberately planned. The fancy struck Allan in debating his own situation. And, even as in the heat of his adoration for Violet, he had been chagrined to remark he had not grieved her more lastingly, so that he might have been able to display the variety of his resources for her admiration, so now in the midst of his unhappiness—thoroughly real—he resolved his view of the matter into fastidious words for future service, jotting them down on a piece of paper. “What a heartless hypocrite I should be judged,” he mused an instant later, “how could I have done it?” But albeit his failings were concentrated in his passions, and in his dealings with the other sex he was hopelessly weak—he was not heartless at all. It was natural to him to draw upon his own sensations for material; his writing was to a great extent subjective,

and from this cause his joys and his sorrows, however vivid and however permanent, always seemed to him still more vivid and quite eternal examined through the magnifying lens of self-analysis.

He threw down the pen, and in a paroxysm of disgust tore the memorandum into fragments, pacing the floor with quick uneven strides. By-and-by he saw Mrs. Benjamin out under the cedar with a book in her hand. Where was Violet? He watched the cedar for some while, pondering over the strangeness of the unaccustomed division. Could it be possible she was giving him an opportunity for an interview! He crammed the notes into his pocket as the solution presented itself and roamed out into the hall. His preceding reverie had been so deep, however, that he had not realized how long after his retirement it

had been when Mrs. Benjamin attracted his attention ; the servants had served luncheon, and she was already on her way in. Smothering an oath he went to meet her and learnt his hopes had been deceiving him.

Mrs. Moses had neuralgia, he heard, and was lying down ; he would have to put up with one woman's companionship at lunch to-day.

The intelligence had its compensation insomuch as if she were unwell a sudden curtailment of her visit would be the more remarkable. He murmured his regrets for her indisposition, his pleasure at the prospect of the *tête-à-tête*.

"She is awfully seedy, poor girl !" said his hostess as the butler swept off the covers. "I shall send over to Richmond for a doctor if she isn't better soon."

“Neuralgia is anguish,” he replied, absently. “I wonder religion hasn’t contrived to utilize it in its tortures.”

A hideous misgiving had sprung into his mind that the neuralgia might be a pretence altogether, and she was going to assert directly only her own physician in town could treat it.

The swift dread was dispelled by the entry of the invalid herself, who vowed the pain was much less, and who had obviously been enduring agony. That he had been incredulous to her sufferings now made him feel like the grand inquisitor, and when he looked at her damp forehead where the hair was still moist with the *eau de Cologne*, and saw how white her face was, he was so guiltily wretched that he knew if she glanced at him she must see it.

“Can I go and fetch you anything? is

there anything that would do you good?" he asked in a voice that was a petition for pardon.

"No, thank you, Mr. Morris," she answered, "there is nothing at all."

The eyes lifted to her were as wistful as a collie's, and his misery touched her.

"I often have it," she said more gently; "it is not so very bad!"

"As soon as you have had luncheon you are going back to your room," Helen Benjamin averred. "I told you not to come down; the tray was to have been a picture, and you have spoilt it!"

"No," she smiled, "I am not going to be persuaded I am very ill. After lunch I am going into the garden with you, if you will have me, it is heavenly outside."

"Isn't it perfect," said Allan. "I have been envying Mrs. Benjamin myself. When

I had finished my letters I took out my manuscript—in a moment of weakness—and drifted into a complication that calls for the shade of Poe ; I shall continue envying everything outside all the afternoon. They talk about the perversity of human nature, it's nothing to the perversity of the weather : it is always finest when one is kept indoors."

"She shan't make a prisoner of herself for fear of me!" he thought; "you poor, little, white soul, I'm dead sick of that library, but I'd stand Newgate for you."

Nevertheless, by four o'clock he did wish the plea he had put forward would have reconciled itself to his varying the monotony of his isolation by wandering about some other apartment. To work in reality was out of the question, and the

pattern of the library carpet and of the paper on the walls began to grow depressingly familiar. The sunshine, too, was now of that watery order which alternately flits in and out as if, as the children say, it was "showing off," wavering over everything in a tinge of renewed cheerfulness only to vanish like a soap-bubble at the height of its happiest effort. The vagaries of the sun and the sameness of his surroundings both had their effect on Mr. Morris; he was fast qualifying for that phase of nervous impatience when a man finds fresh food for exasperation in the ponderous tranquillity of the furniture. He had not witnessed the women's egress, so supposed instead of the garden they had gone down to the river from the front. He snatched a novel from the bookcase, and flung himself on the sofa; and there

by primarily compelling himself to grasp the sense of the printed lines managed to get through a couple of hours more.

“I am like the bad boy at school,” he said at last. “I am being shut up! I think the bad boy has been punished sufficiently long, and, besides, by this time the complication which called for the shade of Poe can have been brought to a successful issue!”

Tossing the novel on the table he strolled into the drawing-room, and to his astonishment discovered a portly individual who was a stranger to him stretched placidly upon the couch. The hat of the individual had been deposited on the ground, and from the hand which hung down a bandanna of the-village-fête description drooped languidly over its brim. For a second Mr. Morris stared with the wild idea the man

might be a bailiff, then smiling at the absurdity of the notion he bowed and ensconced himself in an arm-chair between the windows.

“Mrs. Benjamin out!” said the stranger affably. He seemed to be affirming the thing rather than propounding an inquiry, and Morris struggled momentarily with the embarrassment which comes of intrusion.

“I believe she is,” he answered, recovering from his surprise; “are you waiting to see her?”

“Oh, there’s no hurry,” the recumbent one assured him, “don’t trouble; perhaps she’s on the water. Shocking affair that railway accident?”

“*What* railway accident?” said Morris, with a jump. Railway accidents sprung on him in this fashion jarred him to-day.

“Not seen the evening papers, of course! Accident in Northumberland. Nine killed and thirteen——”

“Excuse me,” Morris interrupted; “if I am not mistaken, Mrs. Benjamin is over there. I will go and tell her you are here.”

She was indeed crossing the road, and he went out and joined her at the gate.

“Mrs. Benjamin,” he said, “there’s a visitor for you in the drawing-room; a visitor from town, or Northumberland, or somewhere.”

“What on earth do you mean?” she exclaimed; “who is he?”

“I don’t know—short, stout, and clean shaved! Appears quite at home; he’s lying on the couch.”

“Oh, he *is* at home! It must be Mr. Porter; we leased the place from him. He

honoured us once before when he ran down from town. I came in to fetch the *menthol* for Mrs. Moses."

"How is she—in pain again?"

"Only slightly. I think she is better out than inside."

"I'll take it for you if you give it to me," he said. "Where is it?"

"On her dressing-table, she fancies; I'll send up to see."

Mrs. Benjamin patted her hair a little before the mirror in the hat-rack, and when the *menthol* had been found, he picked up his cap and left her to the entertainment of Mr. Porter.

He descried Mrs. Moses sitting under the awning of the boat-house. The position of her chair prevented her observing his advance, and as she was at the extremity of the end which abutted on the grass, and the

one step did not appreciably raise the flooring, he approached within arm's length of her without his footsteps, deadened by the turf, conveying any warning he was near. Even then, she did not suspect his presence, and his voice startled her.

She welcomed his intrusion by a glance of amazement which was equivalent to the cut direct.

"Mrs. Benjamin has a visitor, she could not come back," he explained, with deprecating haste. "I have brought you the *menthol*."

"Thank you," she said, icily.

"I am so grieved you are ill," he added, after the briefest pause. "When you came in to luncheon my repentance for having distressed you nearly choked me! I have forfeited the right to say it, but I must tell you, I——"

"Tell me nothing," she said; "I do not wish to hear."

"Give me a minute—one minute!"

"I will *not* hear you!"

"She half rose, and he laid his hand on the chair.

"I beg you! I too am suffering—remorse! I have done this, I know it; your pallor has been haunting me. However much you hate me now, you would be content if you guessed how I am feeling. I am miserable, I don't know what to do to show you how sorry I am?"

"Keep away from me. Mr. Morris, you speak of rights; I have the right to bid you do that: you have given it to me! Every hour of my stay here has become an infliction—you must understand it."

"I understand it too well," he said. "I have given you the right? you had it

always ! I obeyed you as a boy, I will obey you as a man. To keep away from you is the hardest thing you could have bidden me do ; but the order is so just that you will not even imagine what it costs me to fulfil. . . . When I never see you any more, will you try to forgive me for not having been able to forget ? ” .

“ It is getting dark,” she exclaimed ; “ I am going in.”

She got up, and he stood in front of her and barred her way.

“ I have promised. I have lost everything I valued in my existence,” he cried, passionately ; “ you load me with reproaches, you leave me without a hope, and you can’t so much as pity me ! After all, what have *you* lost, what have *you* relinquished ? Your trouble is just your wounded dignity—what is that to mine ? When you were a girl I

told you I loved you, and asked you to be my wife : because that love was so true that it has been the misfortune of my life I am a villain your purity cannot even stoop to compassionate. Merciful heaven ! how virtuously brutal you good women can be ! ”

The sun had sunk into the deepening gloom which was enveloping the scene in its solemnity, and now some rain-drops commenced to patter on the canvas.

“ I will not listen to this sort of talk,” said Mrs. Moses, hurriedly ; “ be kind enough to let me pass.”

He made a movement as if to comply, and then, by what almost seemed an involuntary action, delayed her once more.

“ It is the last time I can offend you. After to-morrow I shall never have a chance ! Do you know when you said ‘ Good-bye ’ to me in Chester I sobbed like

a child. Have you ever seen a man cry? I sobbed my heart out. . . . What you were to me then, you are now; it will be to me now what it was then—worse! Then I had some hope, a glimmer, a vestige of it—you were free! Here I have nothing. God help me, I shall be desolate! Be a little tender, I am all alone in the world. Say a kind word to me before you go.”

The rain was no longer pattering. It was pelting down in flashing, perpendicular lines upon the covering above their heads, upon the yielding bushes, and on the breadth of quivering river. Now and again a boat shot by, as some drenched, belated oarsman pulled lustily for shelter.

She stood looking vaguely at the drops leaping up from the surface of the water, and he stood looking at her.

“You are paining yourself more terribly

with every syllable," she said at length, softly, "and you are hurting me. I *will* try to forget your confession; I want you to try to forget it as well. I reproach myself deeply for having been with you so much. If I had foreseen it would make you so wretched I would have avoided you. I don't know what else I can say. There is nothing I could say that would comfort you. Supposing I had been so weak as to return the feeling you think you have for me . . ."

"‘Think,’" he echoed.

"I beg your pardon for that. I will be honest: the feeling you *have* for me! Supposing I had returned it, supposing I had . . . cared for you . . ."

"Ah!"

"How would it have made you any happier? To me it would have been a calamity, something so dreadful that I can

but dimly realize what I have escaped; but what would have been the difference to you? Would it have made you easier when you left me to feel my fate was as cruel as your own? Surely not?"

"If you had cared for me," he answered, "I would not have left you. As we are, I can only mourn, and lament, and weary you; but if I had had your love I would have swept aside the——"

"Don't go on," she said; "I thought that was what was making your pain so hard to bear. It is hardly a compliment to me to imagine what you do, but—— (I wish I were somebody else for a moment—a man! I want to speak quite frankly to you because I want to make the pain less if I can). Wait a minute. . . . You believe if your love had been returned my folly would have deprived me of all perception of right and

wrong—that it would have dulled my conscience, and made me wicked as well as weak? It would not. If I had loved you we should have parted just as we are parting now, . . . our good-bye would have been just like this. . . . Come, it is not raining so much, let us go back to the house.”

“It will soon stop,” he murmured, huskily; “you can’t go through it yet.”

“We *must* go back,” she persisted; “it is chilly and damp. I wish to go.”

Inside the boat-house, among the punt cushions and some lemonade bottles, lay a rug. He lifted his arms wearily from the woodwork where he had been leaning, and brought it out to her.

“Sit down again,” he said, “and keep this round you. You can’t go out with nothing to protect you till the shower is over. I will fetch an umbrella for you.”

Her gentleness had been as void of consolation to him as the "God have mercy on your soul" to a man doomed for execution. The abatement of the storm itself as he left her was uncongenial—he would have preferred to have been buffeted by a tempest—and when he reached the top of the lane, and a sunbeam flickered again through the clouds, the lifting of the darkness seemed to intensify his dejection.

With consternation he beheld Mr. Moses in the frock-coat in which he had driven from the station, and folding an umbrella, coming down the carriage-drive.

"Ah, Morris," Leopold remarked in passing, "Mrs. Benjamin told me you'd just gone down to the wife. She's seedy, eh?"

He happened to be in an excellent humour, having had a good day, so did not

notice the curtness of the rejoinder, but, giving his head an upward jerk at the sky, strode on, complacently twirling the umbrella, which, coupled with its situation, had been responsible for Allan's dismay. He twirled it just as the other looked back.

"Decent fellow," he was thinking; "smart in his line, too, they say."

He had had a very good day indeed. Besides, he had missed the "friendly evenings" sorely. For a month now he had not had a game of cards, and the approximant termination of the visit exhilarated him.

He greeted his wife by laying his hands on her shoulders. He was affectionate, even playful: he had nearly placed them round her eyes and blindfolded her instead.

He never knew it, but his touch falling on her when it did stirred her with stronger emotions than he had ever roused in her before. A touch may do much at times, and after her quick start of surprise she lay perfectly still, abandoning herself for a second to the sense of restfulness he had conjured into her breast. Her cares were forgotten, she was at peace; never since she had married him had he affected her as, all unsuspectingly, he affected her now by this chance caress. Lightly as it had fallen, her heart, aching with the pain she had been compelled to inflict, warmed with a new thankfulness, a new joy. The face he could not see was flushed as it had never flushed in the days when he had wooed her. Her eyes filled with tears, and if her indifference as a girl dimly recurred to her it but served to

double the delicious sweetness of the new submission. Love, love paramount and supreme, rendered her insensible to all save the passionate ecstasy that was thrilling her soul, and it was only when he spoke he snapped the spell. For she had thought he was Allan come back.





CHAPTER XXII.

INDEED, to have loved too late seemed the last misfortune Fate could launch at this unhappy woman. She might deny her love to Morris; she might, after the involuntary outburst of weakness in which she had listened to his confession in the orchard, vow that he was nothing to her till her tongue was worn with the lie; she might upbraid him cruelly, womanwise sustained to deal her stabs by the pangs they inflicted in her own heart; but she could not deceive herself. She loved him, and more dearly, more devotedly than he loved her, for she

had given him the only love of a woman whose face had hinted her potentialities for loving when she had been sixteen. And if she had only been steadfast to her better nature, and not married where she was indifferent, it might have been so beautiful, so perfect, she thought, despairingly—excepting that, in that case, they probably would not have met.

She had been awake all night, and now, pallid as her wrapper, lay on the bedroom sofa by the open window, though the breakfast bell had rung, and Leopold was preparing to go down.

“I have not slept,” she repeated, in reply to his remonstrances. “I do not want any breakfast. Pray don’t worry; I will have a cup of tea brought up to me.”

“You ought to see a doctor if you’re

not better. What's the good of going on like this?" He was one of those men whose sympathy for a woman's ailment is always fretful, as if the indisposition was her fault. "Mrs. Benjamin will think it strange if you stay upstairs!"

"Mrs. Benjamin will not think anything of the kind; she knows I was unwell yesterday."

"It's this place, that's what it is," he declared, irritably; "it's enervating. I'm glad our visit is nearly over; it's been as dull as ditchwater, too. Who wants to go bobbing about on a river in a dam boat. I can't swim."

"You were anxious enough to come," she said, with a sigh; "you decided against Brighton directly we got the invitation."

"It riles Rosenstein so to see us intimate with the Benjamins; he's been licking their

shoes for years. He went green when he heard we were going to spend a month in their house. Besides, it has been cheap; there's an advantage about that."

"Yes, it has been very cheap," she answered, "very."

"Hasn't it? My train fares, that's all. It hasn't cost you anything."

"Nothing whatever," she said; "it has cost me nothing."

"But, of course, we must tip the servants," he remarked. "There's the old chap with white hair, and John; I shall give them a sovereign each, or do you think half a sovereign would be enough for John? Then there is the girl who comes up here; I suppose you'll give a sovereign to her? Let me see, one, two, three——"

"Oh, why don't you make haste!"

she exclaimed. "Ask Mrs. Benjamin to send me up some tea, and say I shall try to sleep till luncheon."

"Well, there is plenty of time to settle about the servants to-night," he agreed. "Do you want anything to eat with your tea?"

"Nothing, thanks."

"You ought to eat something. Have an egg?"

"I don't want anything at all."

"No toast?"

"*Please* let me be," she cried; "my eyes are hurting me abominably. I can't talk to you now, indeed I can't!"

She turned to the wall, burying her face in the cushion lest he should attempt to kiss her before he went.

"Good-bye," said Mr. Moses, stiffly. "I hope you'll be all right again when I

get back." There was a pause of an instant before he moved, in which she felt he was looking indignantly at her. Then the door closed, and she was alone.

She sprang to her feet, and began to walk hurriedly about the room; the suppressed excitement which was burning in her veins found its outlet in the bodily exertion, and the thoughts she dared admit to none but herself she now murmured brokenly aloud in her solitude, as if to give voice to them relieved her.

"What have I done," she muttered, "what have I done to be punished like this? Oh, my God, my God, it is killing me!"

She pressed her hands over her forehead, and dropped into a chair as abruptly as she had risen from the couch.

"Why has it happened?" she moaned, "was my fault so great; other women marry

without love, they are not cursed as I am cursed? Oh, my dear, my dear!" She rocked to and fro. "Allan, my beloved! Ah, Heaven look down, protect me, a sinner! God who hears all, who sees all, who *knew* that I should love him, guard me in the peril you have sent!" Then, again, her prayer forgotten: "Allan, my soul, my king!"

By-and-by at the sound of the maid's approach, she composed herself sufficiently to answer her expression of regret and to deliver a message of thanks for Mrs. Benjamin. But the tea remained untasted on the salver beside the sofa, and shivering and hot by turns she lay crying piteously with her head tossing on the pillow.

As to those who have been on the point of drowning, so now, unsummoned by her mind, did her whole life re-arise and unfold itself before her view; but though the past

resuscitated itself by no volition of her own, the memory was not the instantaneous one flashed back at those above whom the waves are closing. The pictures passed slowly; each was vivid and real, then vanished with a jerk as another appeared. They were like a series of slides depicting, to the explanation of tones long hushed, the panorama of her years.

She wondered hopelessly if after Bertha Carroll's death she had appealed to old Mr. Finlason to rescue her from her wretchedness, instead of accepting Leopold's offer, what would have come of it; she might have been still free. Yet he could merely have taken her into his own home; and, under those circumstances, she might have married Walter. Yes, she supposed by this time she would have married Walter. She had grown to regard marriage as an arrangement of destiny rather than a result

produced by woman's will, after the fashion of most women who have blundered. She would have married Walter, and been called "Mrs. Finlason," how odd! "And I am only twenty-three," she thought, "only twenty-three! Many girls' lives are careless as children's at twenty-three; they have never known a care, and mine is over! Some girls are mothers at twenty-three, with babies to be fond of and husbands they love, and I have nothing! Oh, those evenings in London, how shall I bear them when we go back; how shall I bear them? I wish I could die, it would be so simple to die, so easy! Leopold would not miss me much; I have never been a companion to him. . . . Allan!" she spoke it as if it gave her pleasure to say it, "I love you, I *love* you!" She whispered it as if afraid that he might hear: "Allan, I *love* you!"

Morris, however, was far beyond earshot ; he was seated in the drawing-room abstractedly perusing the novel he had begun the preceding afternoon in the library, while Mrs. Benjamin was busy with some frippery in shaded silks. His unwonted industry of yesterday and Mrs. Moses's attack of neuralgia, constituted a coincidence which had not failed to strike Helen Benjamin, since it had had the effect of making her own morning lonesome, and presently she put the embroidery down, and sat gazing intently into space, her brows contracting thoughtfully, and her cheek resting in her hand.

She got up, and ascended to Violet's room, knocking lightly for fear the occupant might be sleeping, and then softly entering, although no response had come.

Violet was still lying down, and, hastily

brushing the tears aside, she crushed the pillow closer to prevent the scrutiny, whose risk she had trusted to avert by her silence.

It was, nevertheless, impossible for Mrs. Benjamin not to perceive she had been crying, and both of them felt it. Certainly it might have been caused by a quarrel with her husband, but Mrs. Benjamin was a shrewd woman, and she did not think it was.

After a few minutes she put her hand on Violet's—she was sitting on the edge of the couch—and said without any preamble, just as women do say these things :

“What is it ?”

The delicate nostrils of the other quivered, and she bit her lip.

“I don't want to pry into your affairs,” said Mrs. Benjamin, gently, “you shall have neuralgia as long as you like, and I won't ask you anything if I can't do any good by

it; but I fancied somehow that I might. You're not considering me inquisitive?"

"You are very kind, it is very nice of you, but it is only——"

"Only your own trouble!"

Mrs. Benjamin walked over to the window, and stared out into the garden, and drummed her fingers on the glass.

"Don't think me ungrateful; if there were anything wrong I would tell you; you have always been so . . . What is it makes you imagine I'm not ill?"

"I do believe you're ill! Since I came up, I believe you're a good deal worse than it had occurred to me you might be! Look here, Mrs. Moses," exclaimed Helen Benjamin, brusquely, forsaking the window; "no, and I'm not going to call you 'Mrs. Moses'! I'm old enough to be your mother, and as fond of you as if you were my sister ;

look here, Violet: I'm not a fool if your . . . the others are, and I've got eyes in my head. People don't cry as you've been crying because they have neuralgia! If you and Mr. Moses have been having a row, tell me so, and I'll go away and forget I inquired; but if you're in trouble tell me too. I've had a bigger experience of the world than you have, and you haven't a woman-friend excepting me, child—unless you've found one in Maida Vale! I don't think Maida Vale is equal to supplying you with *confidantes*, is it?"

"You know I have no friends."

"You poor little baby, I do know it. Then come, Violet, tell it all to me. No, wait; I will tell you, and you shall say if I am wrong."

She took her hand again, and smoothed it before she spoke.

"You're fond of that man," she said.

"Oh!" faltered Violet, "oh!"

She began to sob convulsively, and Mrs. Benjamin let her, just keeping hold of her hand to remind her she was there.

"Very?" she asked when the sobs were growing less.

"How you must despise me. You must think me so bad, so bad!"

"I think you nothing of the sort," responded Mrs. Benjamin, cheerfully; "bad women don't make the fuss about the thing that *you* are doing. You are very fond of him! Now I want to know something else: has he spoken to you?"

"I knew him years ago when we were quite young. He was . . . he cared for me then, and I didn't, I . . . it has come all too late. I never meant to make a secret of our having met before. I told

my husband, he knows. Sometimes I have thought he couldn't have understood me, but I never meant to make a secret of it, only it got so hard to say it after a while."

"I see," said Helen; "but has he spoken to you here?"

"Yes, I . . . I told him he was nothing to me. I was brutal; he said I was 'brutal,' and it has been breaking my heart!"

"He shall leave my house to-day," said Helen Benjamin, wrathfully; "he shall leave before you come down!"

"No," begged Violet, "no, don't make a scandal. In the morning we both go, what is the need? Please don't give yourself such an unpleasant task for nothing, please don't, or I shall be sorry I told you. We shall not meet again, I have said so."

“But you don’t suppose I am going to have you making a prisoner of yourself to avoid him, do you? It is preposterous!”

“I will come down; you will stop with me. It is only a few hours, Mrs. Benjamin——”

“‘Helen,’” said Mrs. Benjamin, imperiously, “‘Helen’ and ‘Violet,’ for the future, with your gracious permission!”

“Oh, how good you are being to me,” cried the girl; “how good you are to me, dear.”

“Well, just remember you like me, and let me speak to you frankly, because, if we women don’t stick by one another, what’s the use of us? When you go away from here what do you mean to do? aren’t there sure to be encounters; how then?”

“I believe he will spare me those. He is a gentleman——”

“Very gentlemanly,” interrupted Helen, “to abuse my hospitality!”

“Ah, don’t run him down. It is my fault, and——”

“And you can’t bear to hear me speak ill of him. Violet, take care of yourself.”

“You never dream . . . *Helen*, how can you talk to me if you think me so vile?”

“I don’t; but I am just going to say what I do think. I think you have more strength of character than forty-nine women out of fifty—(oh, no, I don’t regard you as any less strong because you know how to cry hard!)—but it is exactly those of us who are strongest who make the most fatal mistakes when they care in the wrong

places. The weak ones stumble into sin behind a pocket-handkerchief, whimpering all the while, but there are others who *march* into it like heroines — social Charlotte Cordays—glorifying guilt with a splendour it never really has! Violet, no married woman can ever be so happy with any man as she is with her husband. It sounds Utopian, does it not, but it is true. She may love another man better, he may never tire of her, and treat her as if she were his wife, but she will never be able to forget she isn't, and the moments of joy she has bought by her fall won't compensate for the self-respect she has paid for them. *That* is what makes a woman's life with her husband happier than the other can ever be—her self-respect, which is so natural to her that she seldom appreciates it at its value till it is lost. My

dear, supposing for a moment this man did gain such a hold upon you as to lead you wrong, what do you imagine would become of you? Of course, you would go abroad. At first, some idyllic spot chosen for its beauty and retirement, and stay there three months, six months, perhaps,—you tell me he is constant. But he is a man of the world; do you fancy he would be content to live and die there, even if you were? You would go on to Venice—I should say Mr. Morris would temporize with Venice at the beginning, he is romantic and writes books—and your picturesque *solitude à deux* would be exchanged for picturesqueness simply, the *solitude* would be over. You would see couples on their honeymoons—Venice swarms with them—that would be very nice for you! Then you'd proceed to the French watering-places, and one night

at the *table d'hôte* you'd be recognized. Next day, the respectable element would fight shy of you, and you'd notice that the Englishmen who . . . who find their own climate uncongenial . . . began to favour you with glances which were equivalent to a kiss. Ultimately, he would bring you back to London, because everybody always does bring everybody back to London when the romance has worn off, and you'd be cut in Regent Street by the women I meet in your drawing-room. How would you stand that? They would be better than you! I'm not proud of that class of my co-religionists, though I'm proud of my religion; but whether I like them all or not, I'll do all the women of Judaism the justice to say that an instance of a Jewess bringing disgrace on her family is so rare that it may almost be said to never happen,

and when some awful creature who hasn't an idea beyond her Bluff and her dinner drew her skirt away from yours in coming out of Petrzywalski's, her contempt would hardly be exaggerated."

"Ah," cried Violet, clinging to her, "you talk like this because I am not a Jewess. Down in your heart you think that if I were I should not be so sinful."

"Don't be such an idiot," said Mrs. Benjamin, sharply. "I am fonder of you than of any Jewess I know. I don't find nice people are so plentiful that they can afford to be divided by sect distinctions, and wait to be introduced in Heaven. I 'talk like this' because an ounce of forethought's better than a ton of repentance; and I'd sooner bore you with a premature sermon than see you insulted later by virtuous horror that wouldn't do any

good. That Madeira work on your linen's very nice, child. Where did you get it from?"

She would not continue the serious topic any longer, and persisted in discussing trifles for quite half an hour.

"Now," she observed, at length, "I am going to send you up a pigeon and some *Château Yquem*, which you will kindly dispose of, and when you've dressed, come down to me in the drawing-room. I won't make myself unpleasant since you don't want me to; but you can take your 'Alfred David' you shan't be worried here again."

Shortly after her exit, the bird and the wine appeared; and, on descending, Violet found her hostess awaiting her. Morris was not there, but he subsequently lounged in from the grounds, evidently unsuspecting

that any conference had taken place, and delighted to see Mrs. Moses down.

She was, in compliance with Helen Benjamin's behest, reclining on one of the couches, much, she declared, as if she had remained upstairs; but her remonstrance to the contrary she had not been sorry when she was forced to obey, for after her wakeful night she felt fatigued. She lay gazing dreamily out at the objects in view—the trees and the empty chairs under their boughs. Morris, now out of sight, had resumed the novel, and Mrs. Benjamin, opposite him, was again engaged in the execution of the tropical impossibility in fancy work. Everybody was thoughtful, and the faint prick of the needle as it pierced the resistance of the damask was by-and-by the only sound in the room.

The situation of the heroine and the villain in the work which Allan was perusing, with interludes of reflection, were not unlike Mrs. Moses's and his own, the fascination exercised over a man by a married woman being a theme nearly as old as is the institution of matrimony itself. The lover was undoubtedly the villain—it was an English work; in French fiction the villain is the husband. One day (possibly in *Volapuk*) a romance will be penned in which neither is a villain. Let us hope. In the meantime, however, it was disconcerting to Mr. Morris to perceive that the dictionary had been ransacked to supply opprobrious adjectives for the qualification of actions which resembled so closely actions he had committed himself, and it almost disgusted him with his vocation to see it so abused. His attention wan-

dered more and more permanently. A bee buzzed in and hovered round a little, and hummed drowsily through the windows again into the hotter sunshine outside. It was quieter than ever after the bee's departure, the buzz seemed to have left a want in the air which had not been there before. He stared at the lines abstractedly, while the letters swam together. With the subsidence of the earlier breeze the hush could be felt. The needle opposite still stole in and out with placid regularity. Then Helen Benjamin and he both started as if they had been shot.

As the words were murmured through the room, they turned by a simultaneous impulse to the couch : he with such violent delight and terror that he could not have told which feeling was keener ; she, with

horror unalloyed. And when they looked, they saw Violet had spoken them in sleep.

There was a dreadful pause. He bent over the novel, feigning composure, and cudgelling his brains as to what he ought to do. The silence was deathly. Mrs. Benjamin broke it:

“Yes, Mr. Morris,” she said, “I heard!”

“She must be ill,” said Mr. Morris, unsteadily; “feverish. She is not responsible in such a state for——”

Her eyes were riveted upon him, and his own fell.

“Don’t waste your time trying to deceive me,” she said, “after *that*!”

“By my soul,” he muttered, “she’s as pure as yourself, I swear it to you.”

“Do you think I am doubting her?”

But you're trying to make her fond of you, and you shan't."

Even in his anxiety he smiled; he knew this consummation was accomplished.

"I don't admit it proved anything," exclaimed the woman under her breath, "except that you *have* been trying! She was dreaming, less in her senses than a man is when he is drunk. But you've been trying, because you care for her a little and not enough to mind ruining her life."

"An enviable life," he answered, doggedly, "isn't it?"

"Better than you could give her, and you know it. Mr. Morris, you're a gentleman, aren't you? Does it strike you as a very honourable thing to set about stealing another man's wife? I don't care a jot how society reckons these

things, or the law; *I* tell you what you are attempting to do is as dishonest as if you tried to forge his name. You can't get penal servitude for stealing a woman, but it's as dishonest as if she were money, and you could."

He gave a gesture that signified nothing, and sat nervously gnawing his moustache.

"I don't want to quarrel with you. I am a woman myself, and I can sympathize with a great love too, but show me yours *is* great! You know if you were her cruellest enemy you couldn't hope to injure her more vilely than by what you are hoping now as her lover. Mrs. Morris was that age once, and the prettiest girl in the school when I knew her; suppose, after she had married, a man had come on the scene and tempted her in the way that you are

tempting Violet, what would you call *his* exploit to-day if the victim of it had been your mother? *Show* me your love is great, I say, and not a mere selfish passion! Give me your hand, like a good fellow, and promise that after you leave here to-morrow you'll never see her again unless it's by accident. . . . Come, put out your hand and say it, honour bright!"

"I love Violet," he said between his teeth, "so well that I'd throw my soul to hell and hold the price cheap to be with her for a year! I've been a madman for the last twenty-four hours because I thought she was indifferent to me; now I know, from her own lips, it was a lie, I wouldn't yield my hopes of winning her if all the angels came down out of Heaven and stood in my way."

"Then, Mr. Morris," said Helen Ben-

jamin, firmly, "your presence ceases to afford me the slightest pleasure since it threatens the peace of a woman who is my guest."

He bowed, got up, and put the book he had been reading down, unconsciously marking his place in it though he would not see it any more.

"In twenty minutes I shall be gone," he said; "pray make my adieux to your husband, and let me thank you for all your kindnesses. I can only regret events should have happened as they have."

Left alone Mrs. Benjamin moved towards the bell, but with a glance at the sleeper checked herself, and, opening the door more noiselessly than a servant might be expected to do, went out and delivered her instructions in the hall.

"The dog-cart must be round in a

quarter of an hour," she said; "Mr. Morris is recalled to town."

After which she came back and sank limply into her seat, mutely deliberating until the wheels grated on the gravel. Almost at the same moment Morris re-entered.

"I wish you 'good-bye,' Mrs. Benjamin."

"Mr. Morris," she demanded, abruptly, "what do you intend to do?"

He did not answer.

"What do you intend to do?" she repeated, "I want to hear."

"Mrs. Benjamin," he said, "I have never liked you so much as I do now—when I learn how fond you are of *her*; but from the minute I leave your house your right to question me and my actions finishes, and I am accountable for them

only to my God and her husband! Again let me say how extremely sorry I am for the discomfort I have caused."

Then he passed from the room while Violet slept.





CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Morris took his farewell of Mrs. Benjamin with that more or less successful effort to disguise his mortification under collected phrases, his intentions regarding his future steps were quite unformed. He could not have told her what he meant to do had he wished. The few minutes during which he had flung his things together upstairs had been more fully occupied by anathematizing his mistake in having exposed himself to the humiliation than by either revolving plans or feeling grateful for Mrs. Moses's unconscious

avowal. It was not until he strode down the Waterloo platform that his anger began to be tinged by complacency, and, remembering he had acquitted himself in a trying situation with sufficient dignity to be creditable, impromptu, he began to warm with joy, reflecting Violet's surprise would be sorrowful when she awoke.

In the ensuing days, however, he pondered deeply. Not even the previously referred to "systematic scoundrel" of melodrama and fiction himself—whose superabundant wickedness finds outlet in cursing the children in the street as he walks meditating his abduction of the heroine—could have considered more deliberately how best to accomplish an infamous end than this otherwise amiable fellow who had never murdered an uncle in a prologue, forged a benevolent guardian's

signature, nor proposed to abandon his victim to the perils of starvation six weeks after her ruin had been achieved. It would, indeed, almost seem as if the most innocent and unoffending life, the most unoffending and good-hearted man, might, through the force of circumstances and a solitary weakness which under favourable conditions would have been virtue, become imbued by a single evil purpose to the exclusion of all others ; as if circumstances, not a disposition to depravity, inherited vice, or pre-natal influences, were the power which with the majority of mankind determined the bent of their motives, and that a pure-minded lad at twenty-five might at thirty discover himself to be harbouring hopes as villainous in one particular as the rest of his ambitions were praiseworthy and high. It would seem so, I say, if we were

not quite sure that Mr. Morris was the exception, and the rule, as illustrated by the "systematic scoundrel," is that a human being can never be guilty of coveting his neighbour's wife without violating the entire Decalogue.

His means of making his last appeal to Violet appeared to Mr. Morris limited to calling boldly at her house at a time when she was unlikely to have visitors, but an unexplained scruple of conscience prohibited the course, apart from the deterring thought that he might be denied admission. He would despoil her husband with little or no remorse, and he knew it; but to take advantage of his ignorance, to prosecute the attempt under his very roof, revolted some gentlemanly instinct still unsilenced. He had sworn not to set foot in the house again, and though he

would have broken another oath on similar provocation, this one looked to him additionally sacred by reason of the increased temptation to defy it.

He was astonished, and he was delighted, because he took it as an omen, to perceive how small a fear he had of his persuasions failing now that he had learnt her indifference had been pretence. She loved him, and he would win her, and give her happiness. He had loved her too long and too well to doubt his ability in the latter direction, for the knowledge of loving strongly is very sustaining; and it must be recollected that reprehensible and guilty as his feeling for her was, it was, nevertheless, the same feeling that had once prompted him to say he wanted her for his wife. Circumstances only—circumstances which are as the dramatist's

“situations” for the characters on the stage, and also as the limelight which tinges their actions with such varying hues—these alone made his love guilty now, for it was the same love that had once been holy. The man at the limelight box had changed the glass. He had not altered in the respect of his love: he was a villain because circumstances had altered, while he remained the same. None the less, he was a villain. The two aspects of the matter, as they would be presented to the world and him, differed merely insomuch as the world would blame her, and he would blame circumstances. Had she been a widow, or still unwed, when they met again, he would have implored her once more to marry him, nor would it be rash to assert that the union would have been a beautiful one. He imagined,

though he would sooner have held her in honour, that as he could not marry her—at all events, at the beginning—he might give her equal felicity as his mistress, and even believed the tenderness she would show him would be the greater from the nature of their companionship, since, as the alliance would have been obtained by a sacrifice on her part, she would be wistful lest he might ever be miserable, deeming her self-restraint regret. It was essentially a man's mistake flavoured by a *soupeçon* of artistic fancy.

At the end of three days, during which he had done nothing but ascertain she had returned to town and waver between attempted intrusion and the only other resource he could discern, he decided to write to her.

These three days had been to the

woman more terrible than to the man, for, besides her misery, she was the prey to suspense. He had the launching of the bolt in his own hands; she sat mutely trembling, waiting for the bolt to fall. Like all persons, too, who hear that they have once spoken some secret thought in sleep, she was haunted by the hideous dread the accident might be repeated, and the *non bis in idem* argument did not occur to her. Yet her fright of what she might confess was less than her terror of what Allan might do, and the alarm of both was a fraction of the overwhelming agony of thirsting for the presence of him whom it would be sin for her ever to see. She had not the paltry consolation which was his, the reflection that the fault was another's, he was not now her husband. The fault was her own. She recalled

the morning when, moved by his despair, she had petitioned God to let her care for him; better she had remained stone always than have melted to such weakness as this too late. She knew how weak she was, knew how much of her resistance had been spent; she knew she mistrusted herself.

The moment when she had earliest seen she did mistrust herself was a paralysis of the senses only second to the deadly faintness which steals over a woman as she realizes she has succumbed. She shook like a leaf, and felt almost as though she had already fallen. She dropped, shaking, on her knees, and prayed convulsively with her face bowed upon the coverlet. When she rose her teeth chattered, and her palms and brow were quite wet.

Meanwhile, a man was scheming to make her suffer more. And somewhere or other, as you read, there is a man scheming similarly now, and somewhere or other the woman is praying. And, like Morris, the man would cry : "I love her, I do evil that good may come. I am wiser than the All-wise." And he does love her—with the love it is given to most men to know. It is when a man's love for something—a woman or a country—is so pure that the fire if it kindles cannot scathe it, that the man is a hero. That is why heroes upon earth are few, and we keep their memories green with laurels, while our heroines' graves are left to moulder in their multitude by the church across the way.

To begin to doubt her power of resistance is the most appalling horror a woman's virtue ever confronts. Hell itself need hold

no torture more devilish than the reviviscence and eternal prolongation of those minutes in the flesh, when it is as though her identity had slipped away from her—the “self” which was She gone, leaving her tottering with an alien’s feet on the brink of a precipice, giddy with an alien’s brain. It is no more, her former self; all, save consciousness of her peril, has fled. She stretches out her hands and calls for it wildly, the old self that was so strong and brave. She knows if she stumbles and crashes to the bottom, she will lie bathed in her own blood; but on the brink she is still a stranger to herself, and the stranger is too magnetized to retreat.

It is a nightmare from which the sunshine will not rescue her. She is beset by danger, yet the “she” who has contended with it has forsaken her, leaving her with

a new, unrecognizable individuality which is creeping dizzily nearer and nearer to the edge.

The idea that now she had betrayed herself in his hearing, Allan might revoke his resolution to abstain from her "set," and subject her to the ordeals of constant meetings, while seeking an opportunity for pleading to her as she felt he would plead, now that he had learnt she loved him, was to Violet even more awful than the prospect of the appeal he would pour forth. Each *rencontre* would unfit her more shamefully for the crisis.

A few of the Jews had already come back to London from the watering-places—Jews with families these, who had accommodated themselves to the children's holidays—others had not yet gone away; and when an invitation was delivered from Mrs. Simmons,

she instantly determined she would not accept it.

Leopold might go alone. She contemplated the coloured, perfumed note, with its huge monogram in green and gold, and its reference to "a little game," with loathing: it was the symbol of her existence, it represented all she might expect. Never since her marriage had she had weeks so peaceful as those had been on the river until the hour of Allan's declaration, and the musk-scented missive despatched in such haste after her return, sounded the repulsive prelude of the routine she must resume.

There are not many of us who can control our thoughts, and hers, struggle against them as she might, persistently winged themselves to the future that she might—if she chose, which she never would—secure. It was in vain she said, "I will not think of

it," her mind decreed, "you *shall* think!" She set herself to consider some extraneous subject, meditating on it laboriously, opinion by opinion, sentence by sentence, and then—flash! Her thoughts, before she perceived they had eluded her, were back on the forbidden ground again, showing her pictures of the attainable, till, in her desperation at finding she was erring once more, she moaned: "I shall go mad!"

It was in the afternoon the invitation had reached her, and by the next post she received Allan's letter. She took it lethargically—the writing was unfamiliar. If she had any notion about it at all, she supposed by its bulk it was a circular; but while she pulled the sheets from the envelope the knowledge from whom it came was borne upon her. There was no need for her to turn to the signature, though the writer

had signed his name in full, "Allan Morris." "Oh, my God!" she muttered—and hesitated before she unfolded them. It scarcely deserves to be called a coincidence, being too trivial, but she chanced to be lying just where she lay that afternoon when she read his book.

"I beg of you to read this through," he had written; "remember, there is no living creature but you to whom I could pen one word of it. Don't toss it aside like waste paper, for it is a soul entreating to be heard.

"Violet, I want you to make the greatest sacrifice a woman can make for a man. I will use no fine phrases, no sophistry. I want you to commit what friends, strangers, the whole world, will call a deadly sin. Nobody will condemn me very much, the chief burden of the blame will be yours.

Now pause and think how dearly I must love you to bring myself to ask it, for unless I were utterly callous to your feelings, or loved you so absolutely that I could bear anything and everything as the cost of winning you, this very fact, that the price of our joy must be paid by you, would of necessity seal my lips.

“I am not a villain, though I am filling the villain’s *rôle*. I used to be the hero at the beginning of our love story, and to a man in whom pride still lives, you may imagine how hard it seems that he must implore a woman to abandon all for his sake, while he in return can offer to abandon nothing.

“My dear one, I am as a beggar at your feet. I long to prove, and I can only plead. You must believe me before proof is possible, and why should you do

that? Proof in every affair of life must precede confidence. The lover alone says, 'I cannot prove till you have trusted me.'

"Listen: I am looking up into your eyes, and I cannot lie to you. You know what you will lose. I will tell you what you will gain—happiness! 'Happiness, with honour and reputation gone?' you ask. Yes. Happiness such as you have never had, nor I. From the moment you place your hand in mine in token of your faith, I will be husband, brother, sister, mother, all to you in one. Does it sound presumptuous to suppose my love can accomplish so much? Beloved, my love is you, as you are my love. There can be no conceit. The love that is effected by you is of yourself, as fully you as are the mind and soul which caused it. No watchfulness of mine will be needed to understand your

wishes, for that part of you which is my love will divine the other part from which it springs.

“At first we cannot wed; but first and last ours will be a union of the spirit. I am not going to declare to you there are unions misnamed ‘guilty,’ which are, in truth, as holy as those blessed by marriage rites. I do not even think so, and I could not convince you of it if I did, but our earlier companionship will be but the means to the sacred end we both desire. That day when you become my wife and we return from the little church to the spot where we shall have made our home, the prayer I sent up to Heaven years ago will have been fulfilled. I will fall on my knees, and thank God for you with tears, and kiss the hem of your wedding-gown. We will kneel to Him together, there in our home,

you and I, and pray to Him like children, hand in hand, to forgive us our great love, and then you shall raise me, and I will hold you in my arms, my sweetheart and my bride. Violet, Violet, my dear!"

The writing which at the commencement had been orderly enough here degenerated into the veriest scrawl. The letter had evidently been penned under the influence of rapidly-increasing excitement. Words had been frequently omitted, and the phrasing was occasionally a shade doubtful in grammar. He almost appeared to have chosen to be incoherent in preference to incurring the suspicion of having been literary. In fact, he admitted something of the kind further on. He wrote:

"I have said I can relinquish nothing, though I ask you to relinquish all; yet there is something I shall give up, in accordance

with an opinion I once expressed in your hearing, but a thing so small beside the sacrifices I demand of you that I did not dare mention it in the same breath with them—it is my profession. I am independent of it, and I can give you comfort without leaving you to solitary reveries while I devote myself to art. It will be no deprivation; indeed, at this very minute I hate to reflect I am an author, for every sentence that comes fresh from my heart you may deem to be studied and revised. If I were speaking to you you could judge my sincerity. By this you cannot, the confusion itself might be an artifice to touch your sympathy. Oh, my darling, don't wrong me by thinking I could act to you. Whatever my faults are I am true to *you*.

“Violet, *when* will you judge, when

shall I see you? Speech with you I must and will have soon. If you deny me you force upon us both the deceit of feigning indifference night after night before a crowd of people while I dog your footsteps waiting for a chance to occur. I will do it; my promise to avoid you no longer binds me. I do not reproach you for the pain you have inflicted on me, the bitter taunts with which you have stabbed me who have loved you so long. Perhaps it was noble and sublime, though I think a woman to whom a man is dear might well have shown more pity than you have shown to me, even in her virtue; but, after what I have written, you cannot dream that our farewell has been spoken, or that any silence, any pretence of yours now can keep you from me. You may postpone submission, but you shall submit. I do not threaten, but I cease to

plead. I say to you, my life is in your hands; with you it will be perfect, without you it is miserable; I will not suffer misery in patience. You have no right to expect it. A life is a life, whether it is mine or his, and you best know which of the two is likely to miss you more. Send me a line granting me an interview. Don't make me hunt you down, I beseech you, don't. Dearest, as you are strong, be compassionate. I am weak now and at your mercy. When *you* are weak, mine will be the strength to guard and sustain you, and I will do it staunchly and loyally, as there is a Heaven looking down upon me where I sit."

As she finished, the pages drooped slowly to her lap, and she lay stone-still staring into space. His assertion of what he would do if she refused his petition for an inter-

view confirmed a great dread, and her primary emotion was neither love nor grief, but terror. As for him, a dozen times after the epistle had been sent he had wished to recall it; his recollection of its contents was vague, and so much depended on the result it produced. He reviled himself for having written in such haste; in thinking of his letter he saw nothing but a sea of passionate lines and blots. He awaited her reply in a kind of fever, debating his next step if none came. He strove to persuade himself he was not anticipating one, but scarcely left his rooms lest by his absence his suspense should be prolonged. It seems inevitable to many persons in love to be unwittingly blasphemous while supposing themselves to be extremely reverential, and one of his few encouraging thoughts was the memory of the sincere and deep religion

he had been feeling when he wrote, of which, he assured himself, the letter must certainly bear some trace. When it was actually possible for a reply to be received, his restlessness reached its height. Every double knock begot a tension of the nerves which endured till the steps of the janitor had died away in the basement, and left him to hungrily listen for the next. It was when he was despairing of the note, that it arrived. He tore it open, convinced it must be from her, and yet hardly daring to believe in his good fortune. It said simply :

“I am going to Mrs. Simmons’s to-morrow night, and shall be glad if you are there. I wish to speak to you.

“VIOLET MOSES.”

That was all. Short as it was, it had been the last of many attempts ; she had

resolved to confess her distress to him, and implore him by his manhood, by his love for her itself, to have pity on her and leave her unmolested. At first she had meant to write her counter-appeal, but had decided that such a course would entail a correspondence, while if she were brave enough she could decisively terminate the danger by word of mouth in five minutes. A chill presentiment of her intention stole over him as he read. The very place of meeting showed him she meant the interview to be as brief as her response. He repented he had not made an appointment, and begged her to keep it. That he had not been asked to the *réunion* troubled him little; the date was yesterday's, and a call at Mrs. Simmons's house this afternoon would doubtless effect an invitation. He drove there at once, and was told there was to be no Solo Whist, which

was an obstacle the less, but if he had no better engagement, his presence would, of course, be a pleasure. Fearing if he came early a "Solo" table might nevertheless be arranged, he declared he was going to the theatre, but would look in afterwards. On the way back the heaviness which had crept about his heart grew lighter. He knew he was loved, and the woman who could not deny her love was going to hear him that evening. No matter with what determination she was allowing him the chance of speech with her, speech he was about to have. She was to be won or lost directly, in a few hours, according to his powers of uttering what he felt. As the responsibility that rested with him emphasized itself on his comprehension more and more persistently, now the final difficulty of approaching her had been removed, and on the force of

his own arguments alone hung the whole tenor of his future years, an excitement such as he had never before experienced quivered through him from head to foot. The delay to which he had doomed himself, became by degrees well nigh insupportable. Once in thinking what his life would be if she consented, he pressed his hands together and a half-formulated prayer that he might prevail broke from his lips. He checked himself, and shuddered at the idea that she was very probably praying she might be strong enough to make him for ever miserable at the same moment. "O God," he cried, "how can You answer the myriad opponent prayers that go up to You by night and day. Whose will You grant, hers or mine? You who know all things, You who know the eternal truth of this great love in my heart, whose will You grant?" His cham-

bers stifled him, the restraint of the four walls maddened him in his impatience, the monotonous ticking of the clock served to intensify the weariness of the waiting.

He went out into the streets. As he passed a tobacconist's the lamps were being kindled behind the plate glass, and, trifling as was the fact, it was a relief to him to see somebody was of the opinion it was getting dark. He walked swiftly to escape from the crowd; finding himself in Oxford Street, and keeping along it until he reached Hyde Park. The twilight was deepening as he passed under the Marble Arch, the respectable element was thinning, and the depraved commencing to appear. From the purlieus of the Edgware Road, the slipshod and the vicious were already flocking like birds of prey to replace, by their vulture eyes and

fetid breath, the children and their nursemaids who were everywhere abandoning the seats. Presently, until the illuminated clock pointed to twelve, some miles of woodland would, by the grace of man, be given over to squalor and pollution, to putridity and filth, when the gates would be closed, and the breeze of Heaven, by the grace of God, permitted to purify them for the children once more. He turned down a path, and, where the rails were discontinued, struck across the grass. The scarlet coat of a soldier was from time to time visible between the trees; here and there the print dress of a shop girl stained the dusk of the landscape with a splash of distant light. He wandered on until with the gathering gloom, it was as though the entire park had been transformed to a hot-bed of corruption. Solitude was no longer possible. Vice was omniva-

gant and reigned supreme. It slunk by him with shuffling feet; he stumbled on it with his own; husky voices whispered invitations to him out of the blackness. In the scene he had sought for silence his temples began to throb; questions which tortured him obtruded themselves into the rose-colour of his reverie, beating themselves into his brain, and clamouring for attention. "O Almighty," he groaned, trembling, "why should there be any resemblance?" He stood still, and wiped away the sweat from his forehead. "I love her," he muttered, "I love her, she would be my wife!" It was past ten when he had succeeded in wending his way outward into a thoroughfare. He was shaking so, he went into a bar and drank two glasses of neat brandy with which he deadened conscience a good deal, and meeting a hansom hailed it to bear

him home. By the time he entered his rooms he was master of himself again, but he felt as if days had elapsed since he had gone out. The necessity for being cool recurred to him with fresh force. Two destinies were depending on what he said, and he set his teeth with the resolution those destinies should be happy. After he had dressed he sent for a cab, and, catching sight of his reflection in the mirror above the sideboard, perceived that his bow was awry. It had slipped twice before. He wrenched it off, and, going back to his bedroom, put on another. The crumpled cambric he had flung among his brushes was the last thing he noticed as he turned out the gas, and he wondered what his sensations were going to be when he picked it up on his return. He swore they should be gratitude and delight, which would only end

with the grave. He caught the roll of cab-wheels in the distance, noisier, closer, slower. There was the shrillness of a direction, and they jerked to a standstill beneath the windows. His chance was at hand, and by the result of to-night he was to stand or fall.





CHAPTER XXIV.

It was twelve o'clock. The drawing-rooms of the Simmons's illuminated *en suite* by a couple of gasaliers and sundry candelabra, were, nevertheless, but partially in use, for the gatherings attainable in London at this season of the year were small, and the men's and women's games were both proceeding in the apartment which overlooked the street.

As Allan entered, Violet was sitting beside Mrs. Rudolph Jacobs, who was on the point of opening a Jack-pot which had been round three times, while Mr. Moses, with the scowl and cigar which were inseparable from

one's remembrance of him, had just gone the limit "better," at the table near the opposite wall. With the exception of the brief hand-touch tendered him by the woman he had come to meet, the greetings received by Mr. Morris were purely verbal until the crises had been passed.

Presently, when he had pleaded ignorance to the formal inquiry whether he would not join in at Bluff for a change, he deposited himself in the corner occupied by the men where he would see Violet, and yet be away from her, and, albeit her demeanour displayed nothing of her mood, strove to divine what she was thinking. Once he saw her glance rest on her husband, but it was withdrawn almost as quickly as it fell, and then her face was bent over Mrs. Jacobs's cards, so that little save the curve of her neck and cheek remained in view.

She was staring at them blindly. Despite the serenity of her features her heart had palpitated wildly when he came in, and while he lay back in the arm-chair conjecturing her thoughts a faintness like the sickness of death seemed fastening on her throat. The terrible suspense of the preceding hours, which, unlike the man's, had been forced to endure the distraction of platitudes and responses was culminating with the approximation of the ordeal she was to bear. The dissimilitude of her surroundings to the uproar in her soul intensified her agitation, and when she looked at the fat, white fingers of her husband counting a pool while she was struggling with her guilty love, saw him engrossed by Bluff when she was about to cast out of her hopeless life the possibility of a limitless joy, there was an instant in

which everything swam before her blackly, and, unjustly and naturally, she felt she hated him. It was unjust because no suspicion of her danger had pierced Leopold's dulness, and, if she had owned to him that Mr. Morris had insulted her, the interview she was to suffer need never have taken place. It was natural because an insult of this sort is one of the things a woman usually conceals from her husband, even when the other man is not beloved and her husband is; and to-night the selfishness, which was responsible for her habitual depression, appeared brutality by reason of the development her depression had undergone.

At two o'clock Allan and she had not exchanged another word. At intervals their eyes had strayed towards the endmost room where each was instinctively conscious the

sentence would be pronounced, and both wondered vaguely how and how soon they were to find themselves there.

The company now descended to supper. She had been the last to get up.

“When?” he asked, as he held open the door.

“Afterwards,” she said, almost inaudibly. She would not turn to him, and he followed her down the stairs.

They were separated at table, and it was not until the women had finished and hastened to adjourn that he had another glimpse of her. She went out with the rest, among but not of them, he noticed.

As she moved away, her back itself, the fit of her bodice, and the mysteries of her skirt, all constrained him to watch. When he reflected she might in a week be

his own, and these extrinsic things which thrilled him become disguises of her as superficial to him as they were to herself, mysteries to be laughed at together as "only my frocks," he caught a breath which had in it a foretaste of possession. The voices around him were a torturous Babel that he longed to rise and curse. Moses, his jaws distended by mayonnaise, was narrating an offensive anecdote remarkable for its witlessness, and, with a sensation of nausea, Morris speculated if he had related it to his wife yet, or if she would have left him before the wish to do so had occurred.

By-and-by, the men repaired to their cards. Violet had changed her seat, and was no longer pretending interest as a spectatress. Fascinated, Allan's gaze dwelt on her every motion. She, shivers running

through her, inwardly debated when what had to be done could be ventured without risk. The feminine element waxed noisier during the ensuing hour, the males more taciturn. To each of the groups the game was growing serious, and they demonstrated their earnestness in contrary fashion. She could not have told how long it was after the conclusion of supper when he was standing alone with her; she could never recall whether he had pursued or accompanied her, but later they were fronting each other at the extremity of the next room, outside the cretonne *portière* of the one which looked like a tent.

“Violet!”

The remarks of the unseen players from whom they were just screened were quite distinct in their ears.

“Come in here,” he added.

He pulled back the drapery, but she hesitated.

"I can say what I have to say where we are," she began, in low nervous tones; "it will not take a moment . . . I want you to go away."

"Away?"

"Will you go? I beg it of you, it is what I wished to ask you. Will you go away and leave me?"

"No," he answered, "I will not."

She made as if she would speak, but checked herself. Somebody said something about a misdeal, and they both waited till the matter was settled as though it had concerned them.

"I will not go away and leave you," he repeated, after the pause, "because I am going to take you with me!"

“I am here to say two things to you : one is ‘good-bye,’ the other is that I am suffering very much. I can never be a very happy woman, but I can be spared the misery you have threatened to put me to. If . . . if I am anything to you at all you *will* spare me that . . . you would kill me !”

“Why ?”

She was breathing irregularly, and her fingers were never still.

“You know why ! I am not denying any more, I am pleading to you. How can you let me do it ? I beg you to have consideration for me ; I am wretched, but I shall always be honest, always. Why will you pain me for nothing ? you will reap nothing by it but your own contempt. You will be wicked. I am a woman, not so strong as you . . . have pity ! To you

all places are alike; you have no one to keep you here; go abroad. There are other cities than London; you can write anywhere, and you will have done a noble act . . . If that is too much, promise to avoid me at least. I——”

“I——”

“Will you go?”

“Violet, you are wilfully——”

“Oh, for God’s sake!” she burst forth, hoarsely, “do not keep me talking here for ever!” She clenched her hands, and beat them in desperation to her sides. “It is final; I have met you for one minute to make this request. Will you grant it or not?”

“In Heaven’s name let me speak! Listen to me——”

“I will not listen! Will you promise?”

“No.”

“You are a coward!” she said with a gasp. “I despise you!”

“You love me, and we shall go together!” He seized one of the locked hands and strained it to his breast, holding and smoothing it there with both his own. “You deceive yourself into believing the petition is yours, but you know, in reality, it is I who am supplicating to you—supplicating for my very life! There are no ties binding me to England, you say. No, there is no one to be fond of me anywhere. I have no one but you in the whole world, and I appeal to you to redeem the desolation you have caused. *My* misery has been lasting for years. If I had been able to forget you, I might have had a home and wife and peace to-day; but I was not able—I have never been able, and I have nothing! . . . I am

not blaming you, you must not blame yourself. It was not your fault you did not care for me when you were a girl—only my misfortune; but the time has come at last when you do care, and here your responsibility begins! . . . You would remind me your duty now is to another? It is a lie, Violet; your duty is to me! Two people may have sworn they want you, but your duty is to the one whose proof is greater, and whose need is more; the one you can bless to the fuller, the one who will miss you the worse. Ask your heart who that one is—I, or the man there!”

The hand had relaxed; as he ceased, he felt it lying humanly under his grasp over the great throbs that were tearing his chest. He raised it soft and limp, and pressed it to his lips. Then she

drew it away—yet gently. A silence fell, in which the ejaculations and the clink of the coins reached them like a far-off hum; her face had sunk lower and lower; it was hidden after he had kissed her hand, he could not see it. Her bosom heaved; he heard her half-caught sighs mingling with the tremulous rustle of the silk they lifted. . . . Silence still. The guilty hand crept up, clinging to the drapery of the door, and her head was bowed upon it.

“Violet,” he whispered. “Violet!” He pulled the curtain outward; for an instant the warmth of her form was against him, then, burying her brow in the cushion, she dropped on the couch in the crimson dusk of the recess.

“Go away from me,” came muffled by the satin; “don’t stop here!”

“Look at me . . . darling!”

“They will wonder . . . Oh, you are making me ill!”

“I will cherish and protect you as long as we live!”

A moan.

“My sweet, be brave, be pitiful; you can do so much——”

“No, no, no! Oh, I implore you, go in!”

“If you stayed until sunrise no one would notice. Who wants you there . . . you are as loveless as I . . . we two have only each other! What is your fate? you are twenty-three, you may have to drag out the penalty of your mistake as you are doing now for another thirty, forty, fifty years—half a century, perhaps longer; think of it!—all for lack of an hour’s courage. You have no companionship, no

sympathy, no affection; you are treated like a beautiful animal. He remembers you as a man remembers his horse when he wants to ride . . . Is it only my salvation I am praying of you, or your own as well?"

"You are praying me to commit a debasing sin!" She sat erect, wrenched with agony. "I won't! may Providence hear me as I say it—I will not!"

He cried: "You are perjured now by your wedding oath, you are debased already by your mercenary marriage . . . Oh, you are a woman; you can respect yourself so long as the world approves. What difference though you have vowed to honour where you know you loathe? What difference if at each embrace you sicken? What difference though you have bartered yourself away for money

as foully as the foulest? You are married, you are 'respectable,' you are a wife; the world has nothing but praise for a sale like yours—glory in it, and be proud!" He strode to and fro, pacing the floor in a frenzy. "A 'sin' to comfort the affliction you have brought about—a hideous 'sin'! . . . it would be a sublimity, a grandeur. And you would be truthful; now you are a hypocrite, juggling with your conscience, soothing your shame with the salve of Society euphemisms . . . But it would be a sacrifice: you must pay the regard of the fools you visit as the price of our joy, and you can't do it; you value their opinion more than your own esteem. . . . Do you suppose you are deceiving me? Do you suppose you can persuade me that you believe it would be a sin? That I am your lover and not

your husband is your doing; my loneliness is your doing; my despair is your doing. But you would have me reverence you as great and noble because your reputation is so precious to you that you can refuse to atone——”

There was a sudden riot of female voices:

“ A flush ! ”

“ *Flush* ! ”

“ How high ? ”

“ Jack ! ”

“ QUEEN ! ”

“ Mrs. Solomons’ is Queen ! ”

“ She’s taken every blessed pool—ain’t it—not a sixpence . . . ”

“ Rebecca, you didn’t put in ! ”

“ Oh, my ! ”

“ You are stifling your truer instincts . . . you are fighting down your perception of

justice . . . you are balancing the deference of Maida Vale against the claim of a Heaven-created love. And then you call it virtue—by the Lord, it is a crime!” He flung across, and stood yearning down upon her, the words breaking from him in gasps.

“I wish you were steeped in humiliation so that humanity shrunk from you, do you hear that? . . . I wish you were an outcast, and a beggar, for I should love you then, and then you would understand my love! . . . I should want you if you were maimed, . . . I should want you if you were blind! By the spirit of my dearest Dead if your touch were leprous I’d wind your arms round my neck, and love you into the grave. What are your looks to me, do you think all men are brutes? it is you I love, not your whiteness . . . I would clasp your body that I might be

closest to your soul, and if it were vile with disgrace, I would be near it still, because it *is* your soul, the eternal You, as my love is the eternal I!"

She was blanched to ghastliness. While he looked at her her widening eyes had taken the fixedness of a sleep-walker's; it almost seemed as if the straint had dropped a veil between her intellect and anything further he might say. But for the faint flutter of her nostrils, her face, with the teeth indenting the nether lip, was perfectly rigid.

The din went up afresh, shrill and piercing:

"Yes, my dear!"

"No, my dear!"

"Mrs. Nathan, my dear, don't you remember Mrs. Jacobs owed me ten shillings when she changed places with Mrs. Moss?"

“I thought I paid you?”

“No!”

“Oh!”

“Mrs. Hart, it’s you to speak!”

She lifted her hand as if the clamour hurt her. He was beside himself; he gripped her wrist, and pulled it down. “Don’t shut it out,” he exclaimed, “—that is your life!” He felt like a murderer, hesitated—but to lose her, oh, the hellishness of the dread!

“It is the life I would save you from; it will blunt all that is best and highest in you until you sink to the level of the rest!”

“Let me go,” she said, “you are hurting me!”

“All that is best and highest in you . . . you will sink to the others’ vulgarity day by day!”

“Let me go . . . oh how can you be so barbarous——”

“You will try to hold out, but your solitary refinement will be cursed by your remorse . . . you will endeavour to be true to what you were, but you will be haunted by the thought of what you might have been—you need not struggle, you shall hear me, you *shall* hear me, I tell you—it will haunt you, and you will seek to deaden it. I offer you love——”

“Shame! Do you understand English. No, that is my answer! Now, always, for ever, ‘No!’”

“Repentance will gnaw your very soul, I say; you will think of the past when peace was to be had and you were too timid to take it; you will remember a man had only you, and in your selfishness you let him go to perdition. I want you, oh

Violet, I want you! I will be so good to you, so tender, . . . trust me, try me . . . what can I do, what can I say to move you . . . I love you, my heart's heart, I love you, *I love you*, have pity on me, you are my all!"

Speech had gone from her.

He released her hand, and, covering his face, threw himself upon the couch.

In the front room the game had resumed its steady jog-trot.

"Violet . . . Little Vi!"

The old half-forgotten name flashed her girlhood back at her; the tremors which shook him vibrated in her own breast.

"Are you going to have mercy?"

She did not reply; did not, she could not.

"Beloved?"

"I will never alter," she said, at length, "never."

He turned to her.

"You are stone," he retorted, "you always were."

"After to-night you and I will never talk together any more. When you believe it there is something else."

He groaned, "Go on."

"After to-night you and I will never talk together any more, but you can force me to meet you . . . I want you to understand it would be useless . . . I do not remind you what it would be to me to meet you like that; my distress does not matter to you, but it would be useless . . . I have borne your resentment, I have listened to every reproach you have cast at me: you see you will never influence me as you wish. I suppose, as you say,

I am stone." She gasped convulsively. "Since you will lose nothing by it will you promise to keep away from me?"

"Ah, forgive me," he cried, "my poor girl, forgive me, I was mad."

"You have almost killed me," she said, sobbing; "you will never know what you have done."

Contradictory impulses surged up in him and fought hotly for supremacy. He aspired to be magnanimous, but baseness might mean such joy.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, drying her tears; "you cannot realize how sorry I am . . . you call me heartless . . . my pain is as bad as yours."

"Yet you can leave me to suffer?"

"We shall both suffer—apart, dear, if you will be brave enough. I shall suffer always; the future you have drawn for

me may be fulfilled, I do not know ; but this I feel, that comfort will only come to me when I die . . . Don't make it harder for me than it need be, don't let that be your work . . . I would have had our farewell so different to what it has been . . . it is very bitter that the last words between you and me should have been spoken in anger ; but *I* spoke the first, did I not, out in the garden that day . . . and . . . and it has been all my fault, our trouble, not yours. If I had cared for you in time, I might have made you happy."

In thinking of that "might have been," her tears ran forth anew, and he fancied she might yield. Even then, when she was excusing, exonerating him, he fancied she might yield, and nerved himself to torture her still more. He told her there

could, if she would have it so, be a day for him and her when, with her arms about him, she would look back at this hour of trial, and bless him for its happening; that, removed from the conventions which were terrorising her, she would tremble to reflect how narrowly she had escaped becoming their victim. He said that even admitting the thing he begged of her to be a sin—he could not with his clearer views regard it as one, but saying it was evil—her choice lay between two sins, and the lesser of them was surely to be honest and proclaim the truth. It would not, he insisted, be taking the wicked path for the benefit of reaching joy, but, leaving the joy wholly aside, be taking the cleaner of the paths. He said she would perceive it when she was older, when in the maturity of her womanhood she was able to reason

more independently. Then she would realize that to forsake the dissimulation of such a life as she was leading now was a brave and conscientious step. She was at present sustained, because she was duped, by certain elementary notions which would later fall from her mind like a shell, and when they did leave her she would find herself either grateful to intensity that his prayer had rescued her, or bowed in despair before the false gods to which her idolatry had sacrificed their lives. All that a man could urge he urged. All that this man could feel he felt. He entreated her to reconsider while there was still time, and when he forebore, worn by his own force, she repeated, "Good-bye."

Then he did not protest any more. He saw that she was lost to him.

"Good-bye," he echoed, and got up.

“You will do what I ask?”

“Unless it is by chance, I shall never set eyes on you again, never hear your voice, so long as my existence lasts.”

“Oh! God bless you, and help you to forget me,” she faltered. “God bless you and guard you, my dear one, here and hereafter.”

“God will not bless me. *You* could have done it, and you would not, why should He? I would have ruined you . . . I would ruin you now if I were able . . . you are stronger than I, that’s all, and you have won. Come, let me look at you!”

He drew her up, and his sight fastened on her.

“Say it,” he muttered, “say it before I go. . . . I have sworn, you have my

oath—we shall never see each other in the world again . . . tell me once you love me ! ”

She said : “ I love you, Allan ! ” And they clung together, and he kissed her for the first time.

And so it was all over.

She was alone ; and, as he said, she had won. It was a ghastly victory—a victory more terrible than the defeat. To him a calm must follow, and, though he would shrink from discerning it, the calm would have in it a tinge of relief that the feverish suspense of the preceding months was finished. There would be the occupation of debating where he should go. Stupor would give way to a glimmer of anticipation foreseeing the foreign coast, the music and moonlight of foreign nights, even to a mournful exaltation, by degrees, at the

prospect of being adamant to woman's loveliness while he nursed an attractive obduracy in a romantic scene where, nevertheless, the women should be lovely. He would always remember her, but he would be remembered, too, as an exile who had sacrificed himself to her appeal, and from his banishment send forth new novels, encouraged by the sentimental thought that there was a reader far away who would image him as the sheets were written, and weep over his descriptions of men's truth. When he left the house his heart was broken.

She heard the door bang—the woman who was going to read them—and shivered violently. He closed the door and his second volume. To her the slam was the end. She tottered to the window, and pressed her damp face against the glass.

The pavements were white in daybreak, but the window was at the back, and the empty street struck desolation to her soul. Presently, perhaps it was an hour afterwards, perhaps longer, she dragged herself quaking into the glare. It was evidently more than an hour. The wives' game had been concluded, and they were, for the most part, clustered sleepily about the men, waiting the termination of the final deal. Dawn was stealing between the leaves of the Venetian blinds. In the candelabra the candles had burnt low, and the wax was melting down the sconces. There was no sign that she had been missed, nor was her entrance remarked. A momentary hush proclaimed another crisis. Mrs. Simmons, as melting as the candles, the residue of powder accumulated round her nostrils in two streaks, was divided between interest

and a gape. Mrs. Jacobs, the ruling passion strong in fatigue, stared with vacant alternation from her lord and master to the pool. Only old Mrs. Nathan was indifferent; she had lost heavily, and yet chained to the other table, with her purse amidst the scattered pack, sat drearily computing the amount.

Racked and anguished, the wretched woman supported herself on the threshold, and questioned dumbly what she might still expect, what solace the years could ever bring. The kaleidoscope of her life lay shattered at her feet, a heap of splintered glass. Duty had destroyed it, and from the wreck no change could come. Childless and forlorn, her surroundings typified her fate, and her husband snapped the silence. The frown on his forehead deepened. He glanced up

from his cards, and flicked a sovereign forward on the baize. Then, shifting the cigar a little further into the corner of his mouth—

“And a pound better,” said Mr. Moses.



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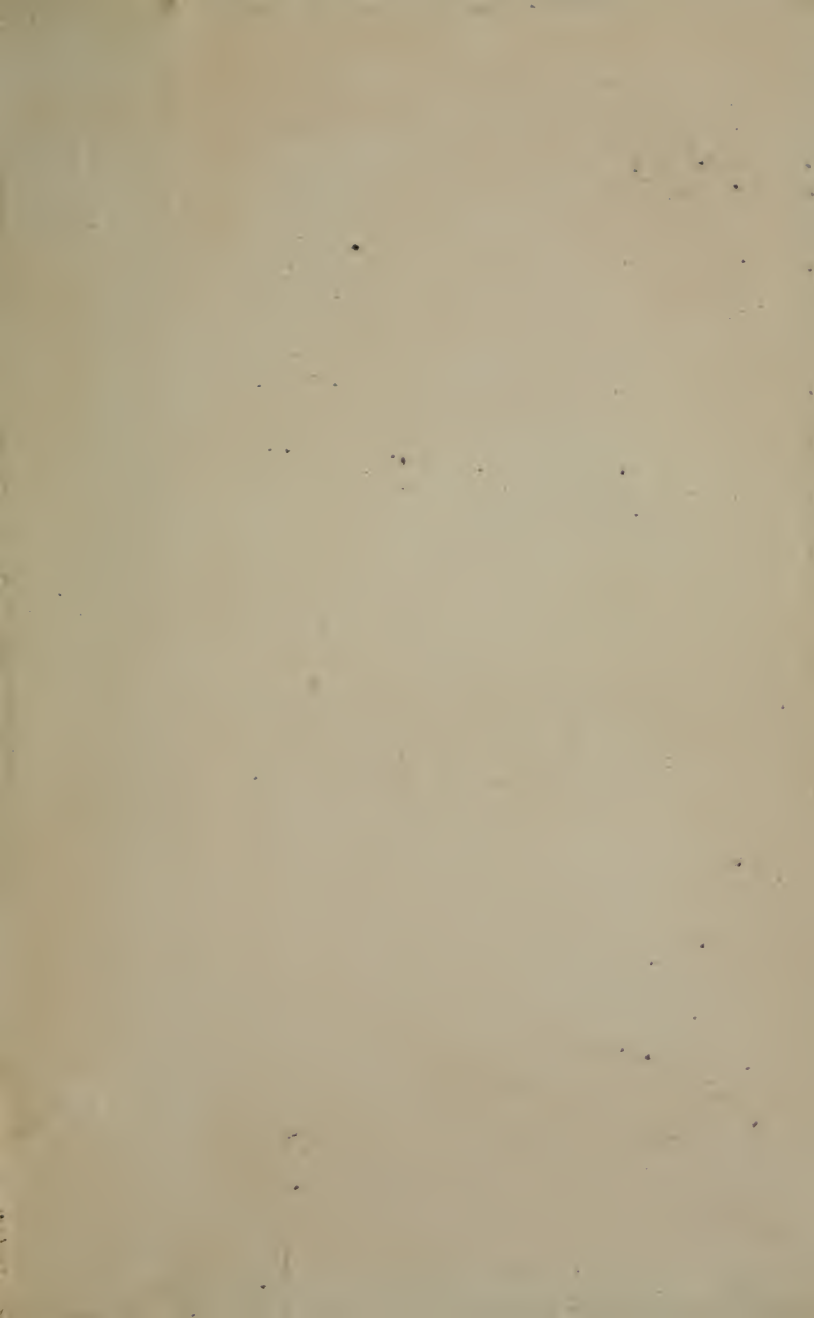
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The Seven Sons of Mammon, by George Augustus Sala.—For Better, for Worse, by Miss Braddon.—Aurora Floyd, by Miss Braddon.—The Adventures of Captain Dangerous, by George Augustus Sala.—The Trials of the Tredgolds.—John Marchmont's Legacy, by Miss Braddon.—Broken to Harness, by Edmund Yates.—Paid in Full, by H. J. Byron.—The Doctor's Wife, by Miss Braddon.—David Chantrey, by W. G. Wills.—Sir Jasper's Tenant, by Miss Braddon.—Land at Last, by Edmund Yates.—Archie Lovell, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Lady Adelaide's Oath, by Mrs. Henry Wood.—A Lost Name, by J. Sheridan Le Fanu.—Steven Lawrence: Yeoman, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Kitty, by M. E. Betham-Edwards.—Vera.—Red as a Rose is She, by Rhoda Broughton.—Susan Fielding, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—A Race for a Wife, by Hawley Smart.—The Bird of Passage, by J. Sheridan Le Fanu.—His Brother's Keeper, by Albany de Fonblanque.—The Landlord of the Sun, by W. Gilbert.—Good-bye, Sweetheart! by Rhoda Broughton.—Ought we to Visit Her? by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—The Illustrious Dr. Mattheus, by MM. Erckmann-Chatrian.—The Wooling o't, by 'Mrs. Alexander.'—The Deceased Wife's Sister, by 'Sidney Mostyn.'—The New Magdalen, by Wilkie Collins.—Uncle John, by W. Whyte-Melville.—A Vagabond Heroine, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—My Beautiful Neighbour.—Leah: A Woman of Fashion, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Patricia Kemball, by Mrs. Lynn Linton.—Philip Leigh.—The Frozen Deep, by Wilkie Collins.—Bitter Fruit, by A. W. Dubourg.—Lilith.—Ralph Wilton's Weird, by 'Mrs. Alexander.'—The Dream Woman, by Wilkie Collins.—Basil's Faith, by A. W. Dubourg.—The American Senator, by Anthony Trollope.—Her Dearest Foe, by 'Mrs. Alexander.'—Vittoria Contarini, by A. W. Dubourg.—The Two Destinies, by Wilkie Collins.—An Old Man's Darling, by A. W. Dubourg.—Cherry Ripe! by Helen Mathers.—A Blue Stocking, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—The Ordeal of Fay, by Mrs. Buxton.—The 'First Violin,' by Jessie Fothergill.—Two Handsome People, Two Jealous People, and a Ring, by Miss Lablache.—Jet, Her Face or Her Fortune, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Auld Robin Gray, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Probation, by Jessie Fothergill.—Ebenezer, by C. G. Leland.—Vivian the Beauty, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Celia, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Adam and Eve, by Mrs. Parr.—The Portrait of a Painter, by Himself, by Lady Pollock.—A Little Bohemian, by Mrs. Godfrey.—The Rebel of the Family, by Mrs. Lynn Linton.—Kith and Kin, by Jessie Fothergill.—The Freres, by 'Mrs. Alexander.'—Marie Dumont, by Lady Pollock.—The Beautiful Miss Roche, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Wild Jack, by Lady Margaret Majendie.—Robin, by Mrs. Parr.—A Ball-room Repentance, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—Unspotted from the World, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Belinda, by Rhoda Broughton.—Ione Stewart, by Mrs. Lynn Linton.—Uncle George's Will.—A Perilous Secret, by Charles Reade.—Mrs. Forrester's Secret, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Peril, by Jessie Fothergill.—Zero: A Story of Monte Carlo, by Mrs. Campbell Praed.—Mitre Court, by Mrs. Riddell.—A Girton Girl, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.—A Bachelor's Blunder, by W. E. Norris.—Put Asunder, by Mrs. Godfrey.—Paston Carew, Miser and Millionaire, by Mrs. Lynn Linton.—Red Spider, by the Author of 'Mehalah,' etc.—The Danvers Jewels.—The Lady with the Carnations, by Marie Corelli.—Loyalty George, by Mrs. Parr.—From Moor Isles, by Jessie Fothergill.—The Rogue, by W. E. Norris.—A Chronicle of Two Months.—Paul's Sister, by Frances M. Peard.—Sir Charles Danvers, by the Author of 'The Danvers Jewels.'—Alas! by Rhoda Broughton.—Pearl Powder, by Mrs. Annie Edwardes.

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